



## **Coroners Society of Ireland Annual Conference**

**Killashee House Hotel, Naas, Co. Kildare**

**Saturday, 12 September 2009**

**Address by Professor John Horgan, Press Ombudsman**

### **Suicide and the Media**

Is suicide news?

Like all apparently simple questions, this is quite a difficult one to answer. The simple – and not very helpful – answer is: “It depends”. This of course begs the next question: “On what, precisely, does it depend?”

This is where things get murky. All news is, to a certain extent, hit and miss. If a tree falls in the forest and no-one is there, is there a noise? If nobody says anything, who will know? If nobody notices, was it unimportant?

The paradox is that while, by and large, all sudden deaths other than deaths from natural causes are news, this does not include all suicides. Most deaths from road accidents are routinely given national news coverage – often right at the top of a national radio or television news bulletin. But coverage of deaths by suicide – almost the same number of fatalities in any given year - is non-routine, episodic, impossible to predict, and frequently highly controversial.

Another part of the paradox is that while coverage of traffic fatalities may be thought, in some general sense, to have a beneficial effect by alerting people to the fatal effects of speed, carelessness and over-indulgence in alcohol, some coverage of suicide is believed to have precisely the opposite effect – to encourage emulation.

There are quite a number of scientific studies that provide at least some evidence for the latter proposition. There is no evidence that I am aware of for the former – indeed I am not even aware that anyone has advanced this hypothesis seriously, or how they would set about testing it if they did.

There are still observable elements of social stigma surrounding the reporting of suicide. This fear of social stigma – sometimes accompanied, in the past, by the refusal of burial in consecrated ground – is probably the greatest single reason why the reporting of death by suicide lags so far behind the reporting of other violent deaths. Not only are all deaths by suicide not reported; there is no clear rationale for why some deaths by suicide are reported in the media and others are not. It is a bit of a lottery, which can be influenced not only by chance but by social class, local alliances, commercial and political pressures, and an old-fashioned desire and not unworthy desire, on the part of editors and journalists, not to exacerbate the grief of already distraught families and friends.

Even when deaths by suicide are reported in the media, circumlocution is the technique most frequently employed. “The Gardai are not looking for anyone else in connection with this incident”, and the frequent use of the adjective “tragic”, without any reason being offered why this death should be more tragic than any other, are only the two most obvious examples of this. The lack of an explanation is itself the explanation.

It goes without saying, of course, that news of deaths by suicide, especially among young people, is spread by new electronic communication and social networking sites among their friends and acquaintances at a speed that leaves the traditional media gasping in their wake. This is part of the reason why the traditional media feel that they cannot and should not ignore it. But the larger and more valid reason is that suicide today is a major social phenomenon, and this is why the traditional media reject the ‘push-it-under-the-carpet’ syndrome that informed an earlier, less wired world.

It is, however, much easier to agree that the media should, along with other social institutions, not ignore the phenomenon of suicide, than it is to say how they should approach it, discuss it, and how they should reflect its multi-faceted reality.

It is fair to say that the media themselves are increasingly conscious of the need to chart a sensible and realistic course from the past into the future, away from the evasions and cover-ups of the past and towards a mode of writing about this most sensitive of areas in ways that do justice to the social realities involved without exploiting human grief – or, worse – prurience – for short term gain. It is worth noting that at a recent delegate conference of the NUJ in Tullamore, a motion dealing with the reporting of suicide attracted so many speakers – many more than some of the more contentious industrial topics under discussion – that the time for debate had to be extended. There is a real human concern among journalists about this, and for many reasons. I give a few:

- Journalists are human beings with their own experiences of bereavement and loss. There are more than 4,000 professional journalists working in Ireland at the moment. Given the incidence of suicide in our society, it is almost inconceivable that many of them have not had a very personal experience of the trauma it causes. As this experience and this knowledge becomes more widespread in their ranks, so will an understanding of suicide and the issues it raises grow among this influential group of professionals.
- There is a greater consciousness that reporting of suicide by the press can play a crucial role in many ways. Reporting that respects the human dignity of those who have died and of those who have been bereaved can not only echo but validate the grief of those who have suffered loss. Reporting that avoids hurtful speculation or unnecessary detail can still be truthful and accurate.
- At a remove from actual incidents of suicide, thoughtful and well-researched journalism can open up and explore the many issues that have a bearing on suicide – mental health, social supports for people under stress, public policy and resource allocation, to name only a few. The reporting of suicide in newspapers generally is now frequently different from what used to happen: information about helplines and other positive initiatives in news stories and features about deaths by suicide are a notable feature of the new and very pro-active approach. At a time when the press generally are often accused of needless sensationalism, these are welcome developments that should be flagged and saluted.

I would now like to deal briefly with aspects of the Code of Practice for Newspapers and Periodicals that have a bearing on this morning's topic. The Code, under which most Irish journalists now operate, has a lengthy section entitled Principle 5 – Privacy. The operational part of this principle insofar as it will concern you is Principle 5.3.

This states:

***Sympathy and discretion must be shown at all times in seeking information in situations of personal grief or shock. In publishing such information, the feelings of grieving families should be taken into account. This should not be interpreted as restricting the right to report judicial proceedings.***

Perhaps I can parse and analyse this a bit for you. The first thing to note is that journalists should exercise sympathy and discretion both in “seeking” information and in “publishing” that information. This is a Principle that governs, not only what may be published, but journalists' conduct.

The second thing is that this Principle, and the others in the Code, amount to a sea-change in the norms of accountability governing the Irish print media generally.

What has changed is that, in the past, the decision about what was or was not an appropriate level of sympathy and discretion was one that was always made within a newspaper, sometimes by an editor, sometimes by an individual journalist out on a story. There is now an independent system that can decide, if complaints are made, whether that boundary has been crossed.

Although the Code of Practice has been devised by editors, its application and interpretation are in the hands of the Press Ombudsman, whose independence is written into the Press Council's Articles of Association, or on appeal in the hands of the members of the Press Council – on which representatives of the public interest are in a majority. It is a simple but powerful and effective system of checks and balances that has been created to ensure that the agreed standards are publicly and independently applied.

The final part of this Principle I would like to draw to your attention is the saver at the end:

“This should not be interpreted as restricting the right to report judicial proceedings.”

Coroner's courts, of course, are judicial proceedings. Some elements of these proceedings may cause distress for reasons

quite unconnected with the press – the fact that they are public and that they often take place a considerable time after death by suicide has occurred and the fact that new evidence, often not known to the family, is sometimes presented about the circumstances surrounding the death, may re-awaken the sense of bereavement in all its original intensity.

They are not only instruments of public policy, but are also, more incidentally (it is not part of their primary purpose) for the benefit of the families involved, to help bring closure and certainty, and I know that coroners do everything in their power to assist families in this regard and to mitigate any inevitable distress on such occasions.

Coroners may on occasion request or suggest that the press voluntarily exercise a reasonable discretion in the light of all the circumstances, but they do not have, and I know they would not seek, the power of censorship. Although it is, for obvious reasons, impossible to discover what sort of discretion is exercised by journalists on such occasions, I think I can say with some assurance that discretion is generally part of the stock in trade of journalists, not only when dealing with coroner's courts, but even on occasion when dealing with matters in the ordinary criminal courts or civil courts where they are equally free, under the Code of Practice, to report any evidence given or statements made.

To conclude, I would like to add some thoughts on journalism and coroners' courts generally, although my direct experience of them is very limited.

I am sure that coroners' courts have changed a great deal in recent years. So, at the risk of stating the obvious, the following observations come to mind:

- It may be the first time that those who have been bereaved by suicide have ever been in a court room of any kind. This suggests that coroners' courts should – insofar as they can be – be physically organized in such a way as to minimize any sense of strangeness.
- It is really not the business of a coroner's court to provide a support system for families bereaved by suicide. But, given that the Gardai are effectively the servants of the court in this instance, it might be possible for coroners to encourage a trend whereby specific members of the Gardai can be encouraged by their superiors to act as ad-hoc family liaison officers, who can explain to families in advance what is likely to happen and why it happens, and prepare them insofar as they can be prepared for a difficult experience. Where the original suicide has not been reported as news the inquest will be the family's first public exposure. Even where it has been so reported, the repeating of the information or the presentation of new information not previously known to the family at the inquest can rapidly re-open wounds that have not really closed. In either case, the potential for trauma is great.
- I do not think it would be inappropriate – indeed coroners may do this already – for coroners to remind everyone present not only that the proceedings are public and that members of the press may be present, but that the Code of Practice adopted by the newspaper industry in 2008 places a high value on journalistic sympathy and discretion on occasions of personal grief and distress, and that the Samaritans and other organizations have produced very worthwhile guidelines for journalists in relation to reporting suicide, which are available either from the Samaritans themselves or from the Press Council and through its website. This would obviate any journalists feeling that an attempt is being made to censor them, and at the same time remind the bereaved that there is a necessary public dimension to the proceedings.

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Although it is no part of the responsibilities of a coroner, I tend to think that newspapers themselves, especially regional ones, should also ensure that the reporting of coroners' inquests is allocated as a matter of course to one or a small group of senior reporters who have the experience and judgment required to ensure that, insofar as it is possible (and it is not always possible) relevant facts are put into the public domain without causing undue distress to those most intimately involved.

Above all, I am convinced that, as society as a whole feels its way towards a greater understanding of – and more appropriate responses to – the sad phenomenon of suicide in our era, the particular problems related to the reporting of suicide, and of inquests on deaths by suicide, are best solved by growing cooperation and mutual understanding between all the agencies involved, rather than by hand-me-down rules and regulations which, in any event, can never be adequately calibrated to the details of any particular situation.

I am sure that your profession, together with the media, can and will continue to play a significant part in this shared effort to confront, comprehend, and devise appropriate policy and strategic responses to this most tragic of contemporary phenomena.