

Reports on suicide fit to print

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By Michelle Griffin and Nick O'Malley

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THE TABOO against reporting suicide has been lifted in extensive new guidelines released to the print media today by the Australian Press Council.

The journalistic euphemism for suicide - "police said there were no suspicious circumstances" - may fade away now that the new guidelines acknowledge that reporting suicide can be of public benefit.

The guidelines, which are binding on about 98 per cent of Australian newspapers and magazines, including *The Age*, urge journalists and editors to publish only after seeking permission from family or friends, and only in ways that do not encourage copycats.

Now that suicides are frequently first reported on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, Press Council chairman Professor Julian Disney said there is a greater need for the mainstream press to provide balanced, responsible reporting of suicide to counteract early speculation.

"The likelihood that people will find out about a suicide through social media is very, very high," Professor Disney said. "This highlights the need for the mainstream media to be engaged in responsible reporting."

The new guidelines spell out the council's concerns about giving reports of suicide undue prominence through "unnecessarily explicit headlines or images" and requires that contacts for 24-hour support services be printed alongside references to suicide. Terms such as "died by suicide" or "took his life" are recommended instead of "committed suicide", which the guidelines note may sound like a crime. There may be occasion when the method or location of a suicide may be reported if "the public interest in doing so clearly outweighs the risk, if any, of causing further suicides".

Mental health reform advocate Professor Patrick McGorry, the 2010 Australian of the Year, welcomed the changes, saying: "It's great to see the Press Council say there is a positive benefit to reporting it [suicide]. That's never been said before."

Professor McGorry has long campaigned for wider public discussion of suicide and has suggested that newspapers print a suicide toll similar to the road toll. In December, the Senate report *The Hidden Toll* also called for national suicide figures to be released publicly. "If you have too much inhibition, if you can't tell the story, you can't get the message across," Professor McGorry said.

Barbara Hocking, executive director of SANE Australia, who also consulted on the new guidelines, said that the media must remember the impact of suicide reports on vulnerable or suggestible readers. "Every time there's a story on suicide, it brings it up ... not everyone is robust when reading these stories."

Ms Hocking denied SANE ever wanted a blanket ban on reporting of suicide.

"That part was interpreted by busy media professionals, who said 'OK, let's not go there', but we said, 'Yes, please go there'."

The Age's code of conduct stipulates that we shall not publish information about individual cases of suicide unless it is justified by the wider public interest. The code also requires that care be taken when reporting methods of suicide and that, wherever possible, public information on where to gain help should accompany such reports.

For help or information:

Visit beyondblue.org.au

Call Suicide Helpline Victoria on 1300 651 251