



## Suicide and the Press

The role of newspaper coverage in cases of suicide was highlighted at a meeting in Portlaoise on [Wednesday 3rd December] sponsored by the Press Council of Ireland, and which heard contributions from journalists, experts on suicide, and the Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health, Mr. John Molony TD.

Dave O'Connell, editor of the Connacht Tribune, told the meeting that although his newspaper reported inquests on victims of suicide, it did not disclose their names unless this happened to be in the public interest, which was rarely. The over-riding reason for this, he said, was that local newspaper editors lived in the same community as those who had been bereaved. At the same time, to ignore the existence or the incidence of suicide would open newspapers to the charge of complicity in covering up a crisis.

Accepting that there was sensationalist coverage from time to time, he suggested that this led to a situation in which bereaved families, understandably confused at a time of grief, tarred all the media with the same brush. Coverage of suicide was also like the coverage of other situations, such as crime and the courts, in that there could be unavoidable collateral damage – even the most evil criminals had parents and others who loved them.

Four fifths of the newspapers acted very responsibly in this area, he said, and the proportion was probably even higher among regional papers, a fact that was not always appreciated. Acting responsibly meant that such papers often lost out on the more sensational aspects of stories about suicides, but this in the long run was a small price to pay.

Noting that much controversy related to the incidence of suicide among younger people, he pointed to the increased use of the internet by such age groups, and underlined what he felt was the disturbing prevalence of messages posted to social networking sites of those who had taken their own lives by friends who were writing as if those who had died hadn't really gone.

“The new generation takes its lead from a medium different from ours”, he added, pointing out that this was a problem not only in relation to people who took their own lives but for newspapers generally.

Dr. John Connolly, Secretary of the Irish Association for Suicidology and a psychiatrist, noted that his family had been in the newspaper business with the Connaught Telegraph for more than a century.

Although there was some evidence that a proportion of all suicides by young people had occurred in clusters following widespread publicity of a particular suicide or suicides, he said, the press could not be blamed for all ‘copycat’ clusters. There was also a sense, he suggested, in which the press could help to play a role in preventing the development of such clusters.

Factors which led to increases in suicides in this area included the feeling that people who took their own lives could access a degree of celebrity, could attain the illusion of immortality, or could manipulate the behaviour of others through the attendant publicity.

He pointed to a gender difference in the reporting of suicides, particular cases of murder suicides, in which male perpetrators were generally more harshly stereotyped than females.

In relation to television, he argued that while some ‘soaps’ were problematic in that they could give a lot of unnecessary detail about suicide methods, others treated the subject much more sensitively and could have a therapeutic effect. Media generally, he said, could help by avoiding simplistic explanations for suicide, repetitive or sensational coverage, and by not portraying suicide as a means to an end.

Suicide reporting, on the other hand, also offered substantial opportunities for cooperation and community participation, and there was evidence that this could be achieved. “Nobody would advocate not reporting suicide, but it can be done for good or for ill”, he commented.

“Sensitive reporting saves lives.”

Mr. Pat O'Connor, a solicitor and Coroner for East May, who is also a member of the Press Council, said that in his experience of more than 25 years, the media treated suicide with sympathy and understanding, and that every effort was made to ensure that inquests were not unduly intrusive where the families involved were concerned.

“Suicide can never be presumed by a coroner or a coroner sitting with a jury”, he pointed out, “but must be based on evidence that the deceased intended to take his or her own life.”

Suggesting that guidelines on the reporting of suicide would be beneficial if they were not too detailed or prescriptive, he underlined the role of alcohol; and drugs as a substantial contributing factor about which it was difficult to know what could be done.

“Education and understanding may help to reduce the incidence of suicide in Ireland”, he said, “but regrettably, in my view, it can and never will be eliminated entirely.”

Ms Rita Ann Higgins, the widely published poet from Co. Galway, spoke to the meeting about her own experience of bereavement through the suicide of a family member, and read a moving poem she had written in his memory.

Mr. John Molony, Minister of State at the Department of Health, outlined the work of his department in relation to suicide prevention, and said that he hoped to be bringing forward initiatives in January next which would be aimed particularly at removing the stigma from suicide.

Journalists could play a big part in this, he suggested, and could help bring about some change and alleviate the difficulties of those who were in the throes of bereavement.

A major feature of the audience discussion at the meeting was the value of the provision by newspapers, in association with reports of suicide or of inquests, of factual information about agencies and groups that existed to help vulnerable people and in particular people whose vulnerability might be accentuated by news of others who had taken their own lives.