

Case Study 1: Teen suicide

Transcripts of interviews

Interview 1: Police officer

REPORTER: G'Day Tony. What have we got?

The reporter and the police officer know each other. How might this impact on the type of information the police officer provides?

POLICE OFFICER: What do you reckon, Einstein? We've got an 18-year-old male in a St Hugh's school uniform...deceased! He was found by those kids over there, hanging from a tree, on their way home from school.

REPORTER: When did it happen? I mean, when did he do it?

POLICE OFFICER: Dunno exactly. But he was last seen at school about 11 o'clock this morning.

REPORTER: You got a name?

POLICE OFFICER: Of course I've got a name, but you know I can't tell you anything 'til his parents have been officially notified.

REPORTER: Off the record?

POLICE OFFICER: Off the record it's Carl Lomas...was Carl Lomas.

REPORTER: You don't mean "Lomas", as in Mayor Lomas? This is the second son of Mayor Lomas?

The boy is from a well-known family. How does this impact on the newsworthiness of the incident? What other considerations are there?

POLICE OFFICER: Now, you're getting the picture.

REPORTER: You're sure it's Mayor Lomas's son? I mean how do you know it's him?

POLICE OFFICER: Mate I know everything! It's just my usual standard of brilliant police work. Plus, his license and wallet were in his coat pocket.



REPORTER: So you're saying this is Alan and Rosita Lomas's second son. And their other son, Frank, he was killed in a car accident wasn't he?

POLICE OFFICER: Yeah. Actually I was first one on the scene of that one too. It wasn't a pretty picture either. He was going down the road doing about 100 k's an hour, and then ran straight on into a concrete road barrier.

REPORTER: I thought that was supposed to be an accident.

POLICE OFFICER: You know how these things are.

REPORTER: Was it suicide?

POLICE OFFICER: Open verdict. Not much chance of that one here but.

Does this information influence how the current story is reported?

REPORTER: What d'you mean?

POLICE OFFICER: I can't tell you, can I? I can't tell you everything, can I?

REPORTER: Come on, off the record...

Can a journalist ethically make such an arrangement with a police officer?

Once having made the agreement, can the journalist ever ethically breach it?

POLICE OFFICER: OK...totally off the record, and don't even think about getting clever with this. He's found hanging by the old school-tie over there. When we cut him down he smells like a brewery. So what do you think happened?

Can the journalist use this information? How? What are the constraints?

REPORTER: That's very sad isn't it? I've worked with Rosita Lomas on quite a few things. She keeps so busy with all that charity work.

POLICE OFFICER: Well it beats sitting in council meetings anyway.

REPORTER: OK, can I get a grab for the camera then?

POLICE OFFICER: Sure, but it'll be the real short version. No gory detail, OK?

REPORTER: OK.

REPORTER: Tony, can I just get you to stand there. Steve, can we get a mid-shot of Constable Douglas please, just over my shoulder, but I don't need to be in it. It might be worth coming around this way a bit. How's that looking? Thanks Carol. You look great.

REPORTER: How are things for you Carol?

SOUND ASSISTANT: I just need a level from the Constable, then I'll be set.

REPORTER: Could we get a quick sound check please, Tony?

POLICE OFFICER: The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. That enough?

SOUND ASSISTANT: That's fine thanks.

REPORTER: Everybody set, rolling camera. Verbal ID coming up. Kooroogool Nature Park, an interview with Senior Constable Douglas. Senior Constable Douglas, can you tell us what happened here today please?

POLICE OFFICER: At approximately 2pm today, the Cairnley police station received information that a body had been discovered in this park. That body is of a male but we have been unable to confirm the identity of the person as yet.

This grab is the official version of events. Is everything else speculation?

REPORTER: Can you tell us who found the body?

POLICE OFFICER: The body was found by two male youths who were walking through the park.

REPORTER: And do we have the cause of death at this stage?

POLICE OFFICER: I cannot comment on the cause of death until that has been confirmed by the coroner. However, at this stage I can say there does not appear to be any evidence of foul play.

REPORTER: Constable Douglas, thank you very much. And cut. How was that for you guys?

CAMERA OPERATOR: Cameras fine.

SOUND ASSISTANT: Sound was good.

REPORTER: OK. Thanks very much Tony. I'll leave you to go to whatever it is that you do. You don't mind if I have a quick word with the boys?

POLICE OFFICER: Be my guest, but don't be hard on them too much. They've had a rough day.



Interview 2: Two boys

REPORTER: G'day boys. How are you going? You've had a bit of a shock today, haven't you? I'm from NXN News. I was just wondering whether I could ask you a few questions about what happened today?

Children are vulnerable interviewees, even when they don't appear to be. What issues does this raise for the journalist, both in general, and in this specific instance?

MRS POLAS: You're not going to put them on television are you?

REPORTER: I just want to ask them a couple of questions that's all.

MRS POLAS: I dunno, I suppose that's all right. This is Stan, Stan Polas, I'm his mother, and this is Max, a friend of his.

REPORTER: So you guys found the body, heh? When was that?

STAN: About 1.30, quarter to two. We were walking home from school.

REPORTER: That's a bit early to be coming home from school wasn't it?

MAX: Its sports day, and our game was cancelled.

STAN: We were walking back through the park like always, and we saw something in the tree over there...

MAX: It was awful. He was just hanging there...sort of...crooked. And his face was a really off colour.

How much of this information should the journalist use?

REPORTER: So you got a good look then?

Is this question appropriate? Why or why not?

STAN: You couldn't miss it, it was right near the track. It's a short cut from the oval. It wasn't very private at all.

What considerations are there in identifying the specific location of a suicide in a news report?

REPORTER: So what did you do then?

MAX: Well, we knew he was dead...

STAN: He looked dead, really dead...

MAX: So we ran to that house on the edge of the park, and got the man there to ring the police. Then Stan called his Mum, and we came back here to watch...

STAN: ...to see if we could help.

REPORTER: Did you know him?

STAN and MAX: Yeah.

STAN: He was one of the senior students at our school, about two classes ahead.

REPORTER: What was he like?

Interviewees sometimes like to think they know more than they do so that they can be helpful to journalists. What is the reporter's aim in asking this question? Is it appropriate?

STAN: I dunno really, he didn't hang around with anyone in particular. He didn't have many friends.

MAX: He was a bit of a nerd. Nobody liked him much.

REPORTER: Why not?

STAN: Oh, I don't know. My dad reckons the whole family's a bit weird, and mum thinks they never got over his other brother Frank, he did himself in two years ago.

MRS POLAS: Don't say that Stan, it could have been just a car accident. Nobody knows whether it was suicide or not. This is terrible for the family. I can't believe they've lost another son. They were just trying to get over Frank's death. I thought Carl was OK.

REPORTER: You never can tell, can you. Was there anything particular that you noticed, anything that really took your attention?

The quotes above are all forms of speculation about why the youth would take his own life. Can the journalist use this information?

MAX: No, he was just dead I guess.

STAN: One thing was a bit funny, he'd taken off his coat and shoes, folded his coat and put it on his school bag, like it was all planned and worked out. I can't believe he had the guts to do it.

What might be the effect of quoting this information? Will it sensationalise or romanticise the incident? If so, what harm could be caused by this?



Interview 3: Mrs Lomas (telephone)

MRS LOMAS: Hello?

REPORTER: Mrs Lomas? It's Peter Hosking from NXN News. I don't know if you'll remember me, but I worked with you on the lead-up to the two last major fund-raisers.

MRS LOMAS: Yes Peter, I remember. How can I help you?

REPORTER: Well I just wanted to ring to say how sorry I was to hear about your recent loss.

MRS LOMAS: Thank you.

REPORTER: I know that things must be very difficult for you at the moment. You and your husband have done a lot for the community, and people have been very shocked by what's happened. I was just wondering if you might want an opportunity to talk about what has happened. If you're able to, I think it could really help people understand what you're going through.

What can be achieved by talking to the deceased's mother? Is this intrusion? Can it be justified? How? Could the interview be of benefit to the boy's family? To the audience? How?

MRS LOMAS: Oh, I'm not sure...What did you have in mind?

REPORTER: Well, I could just come to your home and we could have a talk. I don't want to push this, but I'm really open to anything that you have to say.

MRS LOMAS: Well, it could help. It's so hard, what with Alan's position, and with what I do around the place, people just expect you to get on with it ...you know, 'business as normal'... but it just can't be like that! We've lost two beautiful sons ...and it isn't any easier for us than anybody else.

What limitations are there to the public role of a public figure?

REPORTER: I understand. It must be very hard.

MRS LOMAS: When do you want to come?

REPORTER: Would tomorrow be convenient? Say 11 o'clock.

MRS LOMAS: Umm ... in the morning. Yes, that should be all right.

REPORTER: Thanks Mrs. Lomas. I'll see you tomorrow morning, at 11 o'clock. OK bye-bye.

MRS LOMAS: Good-bye.

Interview 4: Mrs Lomas

REPORTER: Thank you for talking with me, Mrs Lomas, I understand it must be very difficult.

MRS LOMAS: I just want people to know the truth about Carl. He was a good boy, and a wonderful human being...and that we all miss him so much. People have been saying terrible things about Carl.

What might the mother be hoping to achieve by talking to the journalist? Is this appropriate?

REPORTER: What sort of things, Mrs Lomas?

MRS LOMAS: That he drank. He never touched a drop of alcohol in his life, never.

REPORTER: Are you sure? He was 18. I mean, most eighteen-year-olds have tried a drink from time to time.

MRS LOMAS: Of course I'm sure. What are you saying, are you saying I didn't know my own son? He was a wonderful boy, especially when our other son, Frank, died. I guess at least they're together now. If only I could join them...

This information is highly emotional and embodies the grief felt by the mother. Is it an invasion of privacy to broadcast or print these quotes?

REPORTER: Was Carl a happy boy, Mrs Lomas? People should remember him the way he really was.

MRS LOMAS: Oh yes, always happy. He had lots of friends. None of us expected this. He had everything to live for.

How does this compare to what the boys said? Is this consistent with warning signs and risk factors for suicide?

REPORTER: So why do you think this has happened?

MRS LOMAS: I don't have any answers...not for me... not for anyone. The answers have gone to the grave with him...we'll never know!

Avoid portraying suicide as unfathomable or unpreventable. This reinforces myths and stereotypes about suicide.

REPORTER: So you weren't aware of any problems at all?

MRS LOMAS: Well, of course, he was like any teenager, he had his ups and downs, nothing serious. He was very sad when his brotherof course, we were all very sad.



REPORTER: Was that when you threw yourself into all that charity work... the Save the Children Fund? That must have taken you all over Australia. Did Carl maybe resent that you were away all of the time?

Journalists should be aware that people bereaved people by suicide may be at a greater risk themselves.

Journalists should be careful about what they ask or imply at this stage. Journalists should also consider how the effects of grief may impact on what is said.

MRS LOMAS: What? I don't know. I don't think so. What are you saying?

REPORTER: Nothing at all Mrs Lomas, I'm just wanting people to know the sort of boy that Carl was.

MRS LOMAS: What sort of boy? What do you mean by that? He was good boy, a decent boy. What are you trying to say? I don't want to talk about it anymore.

REPORTER: That's fine, Mrs Lomas. I'm sorry; I didn't mean to upset you.

MRS LOMAS: I'm sorry too. Everything is just so awful at the moment.

Should a reporter use this information after the interview has formally ended? How should the information she provides about her son be interpreted?

REPORTER: I understand. Thank you so much for talking with me.