

## Case Study 4: High profile attempted suicide

### Student notes

This case study is designed to give students some practice in considering issues associated with reporting and communicating about mental illness or suicide, so that they will be better prepared to deal with such situations should they arise, when they are working as a journalist or public relations practitioner. Mental illness and suicide are sensitive and complex issues and it is natural that some people may feel uncomfortable talking about them. Usually, these feelings are temporary and do not cause serious distress. However, if students do become distressed as a result of using these materials or because of other problems, and these feelings continue, they should talk to someone they trust such as a lecturer, tutor, or counsellor at their university. Students can also talk to a GP, health professional or call a crisis counselling service such as:

- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (5-25 years)
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467

For online information visit: [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au) and [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

There has been considerable debate about whether media portrayal of suicide leads to imitation or “copycat” suicide. A recent Australian review has concluded that there *is* an association between non-fictional media portrayal of suicide and actual suicide, and in some cases, this association is likely to be causal (Pirkis & Blood, 2010). This has implications for the way suicide is represented in the media. In particular, it becomes important to consider the potential effect of a report on an emotionally vulnerable individual. People in despair are often unable to identify solutions to their problems and may be influenced by what they read, view, or hear. The effect may be more profound if someone feels able to identify with the person who died, perhaps because they are in the same age group or share similar experiences or ideals. An explicit report, particularly one that provides details about the method of suicide, may lead those who are vulnerable to take a similar course of action. Suicide is a legitimate topic for serious discussion in the media, like other mental health issues. However, the presentation of suicide should be done with great care. Journalists are urged to consider suicide in the context of a larger problem and emphasise the relationship between mental illness, particularly depression, and suicide risk.

### The scenario and stimulus material

Students are invited to critically review three newspaper articles that provide comment on the high profile attempt by former NSW Opposition Leader, John Brogden, to take his life in August 2005. Articles one and two were printed on Thursday 1 September 2005 by *The Age* newspaper. Article three was printed by *The Daily Telegraph* on Wednesday 31 August 2005. The articles can be downloaded as a PDF in their original format or as transcripts from the *Mindframe* for Universities website. See the documents accompanying these notes titled *Case Study 4: Media articles* and *Case Study 4: Media article transcripts*.



## Questions for consideration

When undertaking these tasks, you may ask students to consider the questions outlined below. A discussion of each question is provided in the following pages.

**Question 1:** Although the media tend not to report on suicide generally, there is an obligation to report on such cases when the person involved is well known. Should the same precautions be taken when reporting an attempted suicide? What can journalists do in these circumstances to minimise the potential for harm?

**Question 2:** What elements of articles one and two could be considered 'preferred reporting', in terms of the issues to consider when reporting on suicide or mental illness? Is there anything that could have been done better?

**Question 3:** Consider article three in comparison to the first two reports. How does it differ in content and tone? How could it have been written differently?

**Question 4:** It is important for journalists to have some knowledge of mental health issues, including suicide, in order to present an accurate and balanced story. What do you think are the common risk factors and protective factors associated with suicide? Which age group in the Australian population is most at risk of taking their own life?

## References

Pirkis, J., & Blood, R. (2010). *Suicide and the News and Information Media: A Critical Review*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.