

Guide for Judicial Officers

Courts are a valuable source of information for the media about incidents of suicide that they may deem to be ‘newsworthy’. Through court proceedings and inquests, journalists are privy to details about the circumstances surrounding a death. As such, courts may be called upon by the media to make comment about particular cases or issues from time to time. While coroners and other court officials may not talk directly to the media or seek out media coverage, their general dealings with journalists in the courtroom may have an impact on the way a story is developed.

Key Issues for Judicial Officers

Consider the potential impact of the story and whether to make official media comment.

- Consider if you are able to provide comment or advice to media professionals. Do you need advice or support from your media liaison unit?
- Think about whether the story is likely to have benefits for the community. That is, does it provide an opportunity to increase community understanding, highlight groups at risk or promote help-seeking behaviour in some way? If this is the case, consider in what ways you may be able to have input.

Avoid specific description of the method and location of suicide and consider how to manage this information in the courtroom.

- Where possible, avoid or minimise any detailed discussion of the method or location of suicide. Reporting that includes a detailed description or images of method and/or location of suicide has been linked in some cases to further suicides using the same method or location.
- Consider whether summary remarks and official statements need to include detailed descriptions of the method and/or location of suicide. Use alternatives that do not provide specific details. For example:

Say...

the person took a ‘cocktail of medications that should not be available over the counter’

the person ‘fell to their death from a spot close to the CBD that should have been fenced’

the person ‘took their own life in a hospital room because appropriate mechanisms to ensure safety were not in place’

Rather than...

outlining the specific medications that were taken and where they were sourced

they ‘jumped from a known suicide spot, the Skyline building on Smith Street, which still only has a three-foot safety fence’

she ‘used her bed sheet to hang herself from the ceiling fan because the hospital failed to remove hanging points’.

- Consider how to manage any details regarding the method or location that are raised as part of the proceedings. Is there an opportunity to remind journalists about the codes of practice that discourage any detailed description of method or location of a suicide death?
- When making recommendations about duty of care that may involve suicide methods or highlighting the need for preventative measures at ‘suicide spots’ consider whether providing details may do more harm than good. For example, media stories highlighting the need for further fencing of a particular bridge may in fact increase rates of suicide from that location.
- Be mindful that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities there are cultural protocols around naming and showing pictures or video of a person who has passed away. Consider how to manage this information in the courtroom.

Check your language does not glamorise suicide or present it as normal or an option for dealing with problems.

- Have you considered the impact of any verbal and written language you use about suicide? The language used in media reports can contribute to suicide being presented as glamorous, normal or as an option for dealing with problems.
- Consider how you might manage inappropriate language raised in the courtroom. Always use appropriate language when talking about suicide from the bench. For example:

Use...

‘non fatal’ or ‘attempt on his/her life’

‘took their own life’ or ‘died by suicide’

statements such as ‘increasing rates’ or ‘cluster of deaths’

Rather than...

‘unsuccessful suicide’

‘successful suicide’ or ‘committed suicide’

‘suicide epidemic’ which is sensationalist and inaccurate

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- Avoid simplistic explanations that suggest suicide might be the result of a single factor or event (e.g. a relationship breakdown). This may be difficult when discussing a specific case, but ensure comments do not generalise one case to all cases.