Additional material for chapter 16
Coroners’ courts

Avoid publication of detail which could lead to ‘copy-cat’ suicides
As explained in McNae’s - see pp. 18, 28, 212 and 464 - media reports of suicides, including in coverage of inquests, should not reveal excessive detail of the suicide method. Rule 2.5 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code and clause 5 of the Editors’ Code of Practice say this.

Examples are given here of how the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) ruled on alleged breaches of clause 5. These rulings are indicative of how its successor, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (Ipso) is likely to interpret Clause 5 – see McNae’s chapter 2 on how Ipso replaced the PCC in 2014.

The Editors’ Codebook, produced by the committee which reviews the Editors’ Code, says of clause 5: ‘As the aim is to avoid copycat acts, the rule would — under the spirit of the Code — apply to reporting attempted suicide and to any article appearing to glamorise suicide.’ For the Codebook, see Useful Websites, below.

Case study: In 2012 the PCC ruled that a newspaper had breached (what is now) clause 5 in an inquest report. A man had taken his own life by inhaling gas. The newspaper said that details it published had been placed in the public domain through the inquest, and their omission would have prevented it from fully explaining the coroner’s verdict. But the PCC said that the report contained the name of the gas, how it had been obtained, and the manner in which it had been inhaled, and that, taken together, this level of detail was excessive (A woman v Wiltshire Gazette and Herald, adjudication issued 1 November 2012).

Case study: In 2010 the PCC did not uphold a complaint that the Southern Daily Echo had breached clause 5 in an inquest report. A man had taken his own life by inhaling helium. The Echo’s report said that he had bought a ‘blow up balloon kit’, which included ‘helium canisters’, and had died after ‘inhaling too much’ of the gas. The PCC said that, even though it was a fairly uncommon method of suicide, the Echo was entitled to report the basic details of the method. Details about the precise apparatus that had been constructed - and how much gas had been inhaled - might well have been excessive in breach of the Code, but they had not been included, the PCC said. It was satisfied that the newspaper had published ‘a suitably limited level of detail’ (Ms Rosie Nicol-Harper v Southern Daily Echo, adjudication issued 30 September 2010).

Case study: In 2010 the PCC ruled that The News (Portsmouth) breached clause 5 in an inquest report about a woman who killed herself by taking pills. The report said her handbag had been found to contain pill packets for a set number of a named anti-depressant, and gave the precise quantity of pills that were missing and the dosage she had ingested (compared to the therapeutic dose). It also referred to the amount of alcohol found in her blood. The editor acknowledged that the reference to the number of missing pills might be considered excessive. He agreed to amend the online version of the story and circulated information to all staff about the requirements of the Code clause. The PCC noted that the report contained the name of the anti-depressant, the number of pills missing from the packet and the post-mortem result showing the level of drugs in the deceased’s system. It said that, taken together, this was sufficient information to spell out to readers the precise method of death. It concluded that this level of detail was excessive (A woman v The News (Portsmouth) 28 January 2010).

Case study: In 2009 the PCC upheld a complaint by parents that a report published by the Reading Chronicle contained too much detail about how their daughter killed herself. She had consumed poisonous leaves. The report set out the precise type of leaf that had been used, the fact that the leaves had been ingested, the specific type of toxin found in the leaves, and the fact that death would have been quick as there was no antidote. The newspaper said it had taken care to remove a reference to how the leaves were prepared which, in its view, was the sole detail that could have led to copy-cat suicides. It
considered that it was important to report the fundamental cause of death and said that this particular method of suicide was ‘not that rare’. The PCC ruled that the level of detail was excessive. It said the report included the type of leaf used, how the deceased found out about it, the fact there was no antidote, and a reference to the speed of the process. The PCC said that, taken together, it was concerned that this information may have been sufficient to spell out to others how to carry out such a suicide (Mr and Mrs Marsh v Reading Chronicle, 30 April 2009).

Case study: In 2009 the PCC ruled that several national and local newspapers had breached clause 5 in reports, from an inquest, about how a man cut off his own head with a chainsaw to protest at having his flat repossessed. For example, it upheld a complaint against the Crawley Observer website. The PCC said: ‘The article contained a long and graphic reference to the method of suicide. It set out the precise apparatus that had been constructed by the individual to enable his death.’ The newspaper said it had taken the article from a live feed from the Press Association (PA) and published it unamended. PA had subsequently made clear that it had quickly realised that the content of its copy was too explicit, and then issued a second version of it. Unfortunately, this did not replace the version on the Crawley Observer’s website, due to ‘a procedural failure at PA’. Even before being aware of the PCC complaint, PA took several steps to ensure that the situation would not be repeated. The PCC said it was crucial that newspapers minimise the risk of copycat suicides. ‘This means that, particularly in inquest reports (many of which will be provided by external agencies), care needs to be taken in the editing process to remove excessive detail.’ The Daily Mirror, whose coverage also set out the precise apparatus that had been constructed by the man to enable his suicide, argued that the method of suicide was so exceptional that the reporting of it was in the public interest. The Mirror said it did not consider that the reporting could encourage copycat suicides. It also questioned whether the restriction on the right to report inquests in full was practicable for newspapers or consistent with the principle of open justice. But the PCC ruled that the Mirror was among the newspapers whose coverage had breached the Code. The PCC said it disagreed with the suggestion that the Code should not restrict detail in inquest reports. Clause 5 of the Code enshrines the right to report inquests, but this does not mean that publishing every detail will always be acceptable, it added. The Daily Mail, also ruled to have breached the clause in coverage of the inquest, said it had removed detail from its article as soon as it had been made aware of the problem. It pointed out that online publishing was a 24-hour job, relying on sometimes inexperienced journalists working under tight time pressures. The PCC also ruled that The Sun’s and the Daily Star’s coverage had breached clause 5. Both their reports referred to the existence of the chainsaw, how it had been positioned and how it had been activated. The PCC noted that both newspapers had taken care to remove much of the graphic detail. But the PCC said that, while this was ‘a difficult judgement call’, it felt that on balance their articles ‘still included slightly too much detail to comply with the Code’ (various adjudications issued 2 January 2009).

Case study: In 2009 the PCC ruled that the Daily Sport had breached the Code by publishing a list of what it said were the 10 most popular ‘suicide hotspots’ in the United Kingdom. The Choose Life organisation complained that the newspaper had provided unnecessary detail which might encourage vulnerable people to visit the places shown and take their own lives. As such, the article was highly irresponsible, it said. The Daily Sport said that the article was a fair and balanced factual report in the public interest, based on information in the public domain. The PCC said that references to the whereabouts of individual suicides in the context of a newsworthy event - such as an inquest report - are generally acceptable under the Code. The PCC added that the Code does not seek to prevent a newspaper reporting on the general subject of suicide, or investigating a pattern of suicides, in a manner that serves the public interest. But the PCC said that the Daily Sport article was ‘an entirely gratuitous guide to where individuals have killed themselves’, which explicitly pointed out to people that there were a number of options about how and where to attempt suicide. This was clearly excessive in the context. The PCC said that it was also concerned that the light-hearted presentation of the piece - which referred, for instance, to one bridge as being a ‘well-known favourite for Britain’s top-yourself tourists’ - may have glamorised suicide in the eyes of some readers. As the Code is designed to minimise the chances of imitative suicides, this was a further breach of the Code, the PCC said (Choose Life v Daily Sport, adjudication issued 1 August 2009).
Guidance
Charities which work to reduce the number of suicides have issued guidance to the media – see Useful Websites, below.

The guidance says, for example, that the media should avoid referring to a location as a ‘suicide hot spot’.

The Samaritans’ guidance says: ‘While saying someone hanged themselves or took an overdose is acceptable, detail about the type of ligature or type and quantity of tablets used is not.’

It adds: ‘Never say a method is quick, easy, painless or certain to result in death. Try to avoid portraying anything that is immediate or easy to imitate – especially where the ingredients or tools involved are readily available.’

Inclusion of ‘gratuitous’ detail can breach codes
The media should avoid, when covering an inquest, publishing detail insensitively, because this could breach the general protection in codes of ethics for the feelings of bereaved people. See McNae’s, pp. 349-350, about relevant content in the Editor’s Code and the Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

Case study: In 2016 Ipso ruled that the Gravesend News Shopper had breached what is now Clause 4 of the Editors’ Code. It reported the inquest into the death of a depressed woman who had hanged herself in her bedroom. The report included a quote, from evidence at the inquest, that a neighbour had described seeing the woman’s body hanging like a ‘plastic doll’. The newspaper’s position was that it was necessary to include the comparison of the dead woman to a ‘plastic doll’. But Ipso said that this comparison was gratuitous, ‘given the potential for such an emotive description to cause distress’, and that its inclusion represented a failure to handle publication sensitively. Other complaints made by the woman’s mother about the article were not upheld (Taylor v Gravesend News Shopper, adjudication issued 15 March 2016)

Useful Websites
Editors’ Codebook

http://www.samaritans.org/media-centre/media-guidelines-reporting-suicide
Guidance from The Samaritans charity about coverage of suicides

Guidance from the Papyrus charity, which aims to reduce suicides by young people