

## Guidance for reporting on inquests

### ➤ Background

**While the media has a right to report on legal proceedings, including inquests, reporting on these events presents a set of unique challenges for journalists.**

The public nature of inquest hearings, combined with the amount of graphic evidence that may be shared as evidence, means there is often uncertainty around the level of detail that is safe to include in stories.

Inquests routinely include significant amounts of information about the circumstances surrounding a death, as well as explicit details of the suicide method. For example, in the case of hanging a coroner may describe exactly how a person hanged themselves, including the materials used. While this level of detail is necessary for a coroner to fully investigate a death and reach a verdict, it is dangerous information for a wider audience and can encourage the use of these suicide methods by others.

Research evidence shows that including details of suicide methods in media coverage increases the risk of imitational acts. A research summary published in 2020 has shown that when the media report on specific suicide methods used by a celebrity, there is a 30% increase in the number of deaths in the population using the same method.

When covering inquests, journalists must balance reporting on a sensitive issue, that is in the public interest, while minimising any potential harmful effects on vulnerable people and those who have been bereaved.

It is important to be aware that people who are bereaved by suicide are at greater risk of suicide. News reports about an inquest into the death of a loved one can be additionally distressing. While some families may wish to engage with the media or issue a statement following an inquest, many will not wish to talk to the press and will value privacy.

### Best practice for reporting on inquests

- Based on the research evidence, the safest way to reduce the risk of contagion is to avoid publishing details of suicide methods. If, for example, the cause of death was an overdose, and details about the drugs used are mentioned at the inquest, please do not name the drug or refer to quantities. This applies to commonly used methods, such as hanging, and is particularly important with cases involving novel methods of suicide, where any mention of the method could influence an uptake in its use.
  - Similarly, a suicide death should never be described as instant, painless or inevitable. Even where an inquest hears that a death occurred quickly, please refrain from reporting this. Suggesting that a death by suicide was easy or without pain can increase public perceptions about the effectiveness or lethality of a suicide method and can make death by suicide seem more accessible to vulnerable people. Make clear that suicide is preventable.
  - Be wary of repeating reasons or 'triggers' suggested by witnesses during a hearing, as there is a risk of oversimplification. Highlighting
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a single suspected cause for a death, particularly in a headline, can significantly underplay the complexity of suicidal behaviour. Suicide is extremely complex and most of the time there isn't one event or factor that leads someone to take their own life. A combination of individual, community, and societal factors contribute to the risk of suicide. Oversimplifying suicide increases the likelihood of vulnerable people over-identifying with the deceased, especially if they are experiencing similar issues.

- Take extra care with witness comments. Paramedics and police officers who attended the scene of a suicide may give specific and graphic evidence to the inquest, so apply due caution when covering their statements. If these are taken out of context, it can increase the risk of contagion. For example, if a train driver describes an incident when giving evidence about a suicide, apply caution when deciding what to include in a report. While this detail is necessary for a coroner to investigate a death, this could be harmful information to publish. Avoid repeating simplistic reasons or 'triggers' suggested by witnesses and be mindful that witnesses may not be aware that if reported, their statements could carry a risk to vulnerable people. Witnesses are unlikely to be aware of media guidelines and regulation on reporting suicide.
- Also, apply caution when reporting comments made by the coroner, a remark made to comfort grieving relatives may not be appropriate for a wider audience. Journalists have a duty of care not to reveal details that could be harmful.
- Don't use substantial or verbatim quotes from suicide notes or messages posted online. Publishing the content of a suicide note can lead to a death being romanticised. For example, a heartfelt apology and testimony of undying love for the family left behind.

This type of content could increase the likelihood of vulnerable people identifying with the deceased and may make suicide seem more easily achievable, significantly increasing the risk of imitative behaviour.

- Please remember to report sensitively. Inquests, even those that take place a considerable time after a death, can be extremely distressing for people who have been bereaved.
- Avoid live tweeting or posting on social media from an inquest. While this may be a useful reporting tool in some instances, live tweeting from a suicide hearing is not advised. The absence of normal editorial processes can lead to sensationalising or over-simplifying suicidal behaviour.

## Benefits of sensitive reporting

- There is a public interest in the outcome of inquests. When reported responsibly, information and conclusions shared during an inquest can offer an opportunity to aid understanding of some of the issues surrounding suicide. For example, by highlighting the issues that can contribute to someone becoming vulnerable to suicidal behaviour, such as mental health problems and links between alcohol abuse and suicide.
- Sensitive reporting on the outcome of an inquest can also help to highlight the devastation caused to those who are bereaved. Where possible, work with bereaved families if you are planning to report on the outcome of an inquest. Some families may want to talk about their struggles in order to highlight the risks and help prevent further deaths. For more information see Samaritans' [Guidance on working with people bereaved by suicide](#).
- Remember that including details of sources of support, such as Samaritans' helpline, within reports can encourage vulnerable people to seek help.



## How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to inquests at [mediaadvice@samaritans.org](mailto:mediaadvice@samaritans.org)

For general advice and best practice consult [Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide](#) on our website.

When covering the topic of suicide or self-harm please encourage help-seeking by including sources of support, such as Samaritans' helpline:

*When life is difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on 116 123, email them at [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org), or visit [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) to find your nearest branch.*