

**THE PARLIAMENTARY JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2 ON TUESDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2005.**

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**INQUIRY INTO STRATEGIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF SUICIDE**

**Mr JACK HERMAN**, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY, AUSTRALIAN PRESS COUNCIL (VIA TELE-CONFERENCE) WAS CALLED AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** (Ms Thorp) - Hello Jack, this is Lin Thorp speaking. I am the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Community Development and, whilst you cannot see them, there are six members of the committee here today from both the upper and lower Houses and from all sides of politics. We are looking at the issue of suicide. I believe you have seen our terms of reference. Thanks very much for making yourself available to us. You will notice that one of our reference is the role of the media in suicide prevention, and I wondered if you could bring us up-to-date with the position of the Australian Press Council in this regard.

**Mr HERMAN** - There are two things I think your committee should be aware of with regard to what we do. One is that since 1996 we have had a guidelines statement that was issued to the press then and was amended in July 2001. I e-mailed a copy of that to Charles Casimaty this morning. I don't know if he has had a chance to distribute it or whether he has downloaded it from our website.

**CHAIR** - He is just going to check his e-mail now.

**Mr HERMAN** - It is guideline number 246 from July 2001, and that is an outline of what the council believes is the responsibility of the media in this. Now that is to be supplemented by some more explicit guidelines that have been issued through the Department of Health and Family Services. Their mainframe reference group has issued a booklet which gives fairly detailed guidelines on suicide reporting, not all of which the council agrees with but which, together with the council advisory, provides a fairly strong framework for reporting suicide.

**CHAIR** - In the absence of your e-mail at the moment, could you just run us through the main points?

**Mr HERMAN** - The council's position is that the reporting in the press of suicide has largely been responsible, but it makes a distinction between reporting of the phenomenon of suicide and the reporting of individual cases of suicide. It is in the latter, reporting on individual cases, that the council says that in fact the magazines have to be much more careful in the way that they deal with it. They need to be aware of the desirability of treating suicides with restraint by avoiding the following: adding to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased; any reporting which might encourage copycat suicides; unnecessary references to details of method or place; language which trivialises,

romanticises or glorifies suicide; and loose or slang terms to describe mental illness which might stigmatise or stereotype.

Now, having said that, we also have made a recommendation that all articles dealing with suicide should carry with them reference to counselling services available to people with emotional problems, and since that advisory came out in 1996, there has been increased incidence of that happening in newspapers.

**CHAIR** - What about compliance, Jack?

**Mr HERMAN** - The council is a self-regulatory body. We deal with matters or complaints about non-compliance with our principles and our guidelines through mediation and adjudication.

There have been very few complaints about the reporting of suicide in the press. It was one of those that led to the writing of the Guidelines Act in 1996 and since then I think that perhaps only three or four have dealt with it and none has been regarded by the council as a serious breach of the council's principles or guidelines.

The situation has changed in the print media over the last 20 years. Until about 20 years ago there was almost a tacit agreement, particularly in community newspapers, not to mention suicide at all. A magistrate down in your neck of the woods, in Tasmania, in the mid-1990s who, in dealing with the coronial inquest of the death of a young man in Risdon Jail, criticised the media for its failure to draw attention to the incidence of youth suicide or harm incidence and said that more should be done to ensure that the community was aware of what was going on.

That has to be balanced against the belief of mental health experts that too great a detail on method and whatever could have an copycat effect. So, there is a balancing going on.

There have been a number of instances where press reporting of suicide clusters has in fact been harmful in dealing with it. The *Herald* reported on a cluster of suicides in the Southern Highlands town of Bundanoon. The *Herald Sun* in Melbourne reported on a cluster of suicides in a country town in Victoria - the name has gone out of my mind for a moment - and the *Sunday Mail* in Brisbane drew attention to the use of the Gateway Bridge as a place of suicide leading to an improvement. Kyneton was the Victorian town I was trying to find the name of.

**CHAIR** - Okay.

**Mr HERMAN** - In each of those cases the material helped draw attention to what was going on and brought services to those areas that stopped the incidence of suicide.

Those experts also warned about the incidence of self-harm episodes in particular schools and communities being quite common - where one happens, then another and another. That is not necessarily as the result of media coverage but the result of the fact that people know someone who has done it and that tends to make it okay.

**CHAIR** - Thank you for that.

**Mr WHITELEY** - Jack, just in relation to some of those matters about personal instances, where does the Press Council sit in relation to recent events surrounding more high-profile people such as Joe Korp in Melbourne, for example - there was extensive coverage about detail of that - and also, obviously, Rene Rivkin?

**Mr HERMAN** - There have been three or four actually. We can go back - if you want the current group might have started with Senator Nick Sherry in Tasmania -

**Mr Whiteley** - Yes.

**Mr HERMAN** - and Greg Wilton was not long after that. He had an attempted suicide and then a successful one and then you have had Korp, Rivkin and Brogden all in fairly quick succession.

We as a council have not received complaints about any of those except for one complaint over the Brogden matter which we are dealing with. We also had one about the Rivkin matter but after it was looked at in detail, the conclusion drawn by the complainant that the article that was said to have driven Rivkin over the edge may have appeared after his suicide anyway. So the causal effect was not very strong, but it is a worrying trend and it is one that the council has its eye on, particularly with the group of politicians - Sherry to Brogden. Previously self-harm has not been seen as a way of expressing the concerns of this group of people with either press coverage or the pressures on them. The fact that this has happened is probably a worry, not only for the media coverage, but also for the possibility - as I referred to earlier - of that clustering effect. What one politician does others see as a legitimate way out, if you want, and that copying happens. So that concerns us and, as I said, we have the Brogden matter before us. The council may issue a further statement, depending on how it views those articles from one Sydney newspaper.

**Mr WHITELEY** - That is good, thank you. I suppose I am questioning the genuine commitment by the media to the overall issue of suicide when they are faced with the opportunity to actually make money from it. You are not going to make money from a little story on page 13, but when you are dealing with a politician or a celebrity at the end of the day it would appear that the concern of reporting on personal suicidal issues seems to fall into the background.

**Mr HERMAN** - Yes, that is interesting. The Samaritans in the UK did two qualitative studies after two separate incidents where there were television portrayals of suicide and they found no evidence for a copycat by the method used. There was a fairly detailed study done by a couple of people in Australia after the Kurt Cobain suicide and they found, given the size of the coverage, only a very small incidence of any possible copycat behaviour. The question that arises in the coverage of those things where you draw the line between the necessity to report and the desirability to report responsibly and not in a way that might encourage others to face similar action.

I do not think that newspapers can avoid reporting issues like Sherry or Brogden or Korp. The Rivkin one - and perhaps the Brogden one - were a bit different because of the question of whether the reporting of other things might have been a cause in the action that they took later. That is not a question about the reporting of suicides, that is the more general question about the high-profile individual and whether or not account

should be taken of the effect their reporting might have. But the reporting of the suicide incidents themselves, by and large I would think people would say that the press coverage has been reasonably responsible with one or two exceptions, and those are the ones we have been looking at.

I cannot see any way that the newspapers nowadays can avoid reporting those things; the question is how responsibly they report them and whether or not they draw the attention of those people who read them to the possibility that the availability of counselling services will help them. I noted with the Brogden matter in New South Wales newspapers that reported it also gave counselling service contact details to people.

**CHAIR** - That is good.

**Mr FINCH** - Jack, you referred before to those cluster circumstances in Kyneton and Bundanoon and the reporting of those incidents. Was the press coverage that was given to highlight that done in cooperation with the health authorities and the press in those areas, to try to achieve a result that might slow that circumstance down or tackle that issue?

**Mr HERMAN** - I am not sure about the health authorities but it certainly was done in cooperation with the local police in both cases. There is a very strong, on-going argument within the health community as to the effect that the reporting might have. Some doctors were not happy with the reporting in those cases. As a result of the Kyneton one in August 1992, after the Sunday *Herald Sun* coverage, there were public meetings held within the town to discuss the issue. That discussion led to a situation where something that had been almost underground became a matter of public discussion. People were encouraged to seek counselling and so on. It seemed to short-circuit the cluster. A similar thing happened in Bundanoon in 1997 where the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported it.

**Mr BEST** - I have a couple of questions, Jack. I guess this is something you are talking further about - the regulations or guidelines that are being looked at - what is newsworthy and what isn't. I guess some of the recent cases have reached a point where private things that aren't necessarily relevant to the situation have been reported. Just on the issue of content, whilst obviously there have been correlations between reporting of suicides and actual suicides, I am also concerned about the reporting generally. We had one here not so long ago where the headline was 'Left for Dead'. I thought it was a quite dramatic and unnecessary story; it was a front-page story. There was a picture of a very angry couple and the story itself was about a person who had passed away and there was a complaint that it took a little while for the body to be picked up and taken to a morgue. I could not see the relevance of that story when I looked at the paper. In fact, I thought it was quite a negative, depressing story to put on the front page of a paper. If there was an issue there, fair enough, but I did not like the way it was highlighted. Unfortunately, there was a suicide that night and I still believe there was some correlation between the depressive nature of that front-page story and the suicide that took place that weekend. Whilst we are talking about the issue of reporting suicide, I wonder whether some thought can go into the general nature of reporting things and the need to report death, in particular.

**Mr HERMAN** - I think you are getting into an area that is a bit wider than the parameters of this inquiry. It is a question I raised in the reporting of Rivkin and Brogden - that is, where the press's reporting of what they see as relevant issues can have a major impact on the people being reported. You cannot always predict how people are going to react to any of that.

Your question brought immediately to my mind some of the coverage that has been going on following Cyclone Katrina in New Orleans where there has been some question and a lot of debate in the media in the United States about the extent to which they should be showing things like bodies floating in the waters or reporting on the uncovering of bodies of people who had drowned as the result of the flood waters there. Some outlets decided to cover it, some used images, some did not and, as I said, it is a lively technical debate within the media: that whole question of where you draw the line in reporting on those sorts of issues is an almost impossible one to draw guidelines up about. Those are the issues that the council are dealing with over and over again - the use of images of crimes and tragedies, the reporting of them, whether you use an image, if you use an image should it be on the front page, if it is on the front page in colour is it worse. Those sorts of issues we are constantly debating. I don't think we are going to arrive at an answer but I can assure you from what I understand of the way in which newspapers operate those are also the issues that are debated very strenuously on the newsroom floor when a decision is being made whether or not to use such material, to use images and where to place them and with what emphasis. Those ethical issues I am not sure we can ever find an adequate answer to. I know this answer isn't as helpful to you as it might be.

**Mr BEST** - No, but I think it sheds a bit of light on the position. Just from my point of view, I think the question here is about reporting as opposed to promotion and the financial gain from that. That would just be my comment, I think.

**Mr HERMAN** - I go to universities quite frequently and we run case studies at universities with journalism students on complaints and the study of ethical issues. In fact, some of our members were down last week at the University of Tasmania doing just that with second- and third-year journalism students and one of the assertions that is constantly made is that newspapers run such material on their front page to sell more copies. There has been, as far as I know, no study that indicates that people buy more papers as a result of such images. I can tell you that in the last five years the newspapers have had spikes in sales largely as a result of two incidents. One was, as you would expect, 11 September 2001 where people bought the paper to get more detail on what had happened in New York and the other was the discovery of an AFL footballer in the bathroom with the wife of one of his team mates. Those were the two major spikes in newspaper sales. I haven't ever seen any study to indicate that putting the story of a tragic self-harm incident on the front page of a newspaper in fact increases the sales of the newspaper. My suspicion is that it creates the sort of feeling you just talked about of sadness and depression and that is not necessarily what makes people want to buy a newspaper.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much, Jack. We will leave it there.

**Mr HERMAN** - Thank you very much for calling on the council and if you do need any more information please get in touch. If we can't help you perhaps we can put you in

touch with some of the local editors down there who might be able to give you a bit more insight into their thinking on these matters.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much, we appreciate it. I think we will do just that.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**

**Mr GARRY BAILEY**, EDITOR, THE *MERCURY*, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

**CHAIR** - Thank you very much for making yourself available to us today. As you would be aware, we are doing an inquiry into suicide in Tasmania, and one of our points of reference is the role of the Tasmanian media in suicide prevention.

As you would have heard, we were just talking to Jack Herman, from the Australian Press Council, and he has given us a copy of the guidelines that I assume most major media outlets adhere to as much as they can. We thought with the prominence of the *Mercury* in Tasmania, it would be important to talk to you about your position or the position of your organisation.

**Mr BAILEY** - Being a strongly local newspaper, on a day-to-day basis we would probably go beyond what the Press Council guidelines give us. We looked at a number of other sources of material to give us some guidance. Some years ago the Health department here issued a pamphlet - I don't know whether you have a copy of that, I don't. I have been looking for it since I was invited to address you.

**Mr FINCH** - That was the Tasmanian health service, was it?

**Mr BAILEY** - It was the Tasmanian health service, yes. There were some guidelines issued.

**Mr FINCH** - Jack was just saying there were some that came from Health and Family Services, but that was federally.

**Mr BAILEY** - It may well have been picked up by the State and simply issued under their badge, but the sentiments would be the same. The first thing I have to say about all those, both the press guidelines and anything else that comes to us, they are not the rule book; the line in the sand varies day to day depending on the tide. I am talking about the tide of public opinion more than anything else, and what its effect would have on us as a newspaper, and what our community thinks.

In all my time at the *Mercury* - and I started there in 1969 - we have never reported incidents of suicide unless there has been a wider public effect as a result of the death. If, for example, there is a murder and the perpetrator then commits suicide, then clearly that needs to be reported. You can't disentangle the suicide from the crime; these always come up eventually in front of coroners or in courts. That's a tough one.

We've reported a number of those, the most recent being probably in Launceston which became quite a significant case because of questions raised about what action the police could have taken at the time to prevent it, and you will remember that one. You cannot couch it in fuzzy language to say that someone committed suicide. There's an increasing use of the words 'self harm', but that's fuzzy because does it mean you simply injured yourself in some way having no intention to take your own life, or did you in fact take your own life?

I can see some of the reasons why people might want to promote those sorts of words, I think they are wrong. I think if you want to have a reasonable public debate then you have to use the words and not shy away from them. We have increasingly used the word

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'suicide' where 10 years ago we were being discouraged from even using that. When I started in journalism there was that wonderful euphemism 'there were no suspicious circumstances' every time there was a death. If it was a death by natural causes we said so, and if it was anything else we said, 'no suspicious circumstances' and every reasonably intelligent reader, which means 99.9 per cent of them, knows exactly what we are talking about. So you may have used the word 'suicide', but -

**CHAIR** - And the classified ads that say 'suddenly'.

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes, they do, and that's entirely in the hands of the family. The rules which I try to go by in reporting suicide in our newspaper do not apply of course to the advertising area - and, of course, the only area where it will crop up will be in the death notices. Now if someone chooses to use the word suicide in a death notice - and I have no recollection of one appearing in any Tasmanian newspaper, let alone the *Mercury* - that is entirely up to the advertising department whether they should accept it. If the family wishes to use that and reveal that, it is really a matter for them. I don't think we can interfere.

**Ms HAY** - What would your course of action be though if the family did not but a friend put that wording?

**Mr BAILEY** - That is a tough one. I don't want to slide out from underneath that question, but I do not know what the advertising department's attitude would be. We are quite properly at arm's length from that department. It would cause a hell of a problem.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I have heard of an exact situation - no, their own commonsense and the guidelines, they won't do it unless the nearest relatives -

**Mr BAILEY** - If the next of kin use it, but anyone else, I think you would shy away from it. The most asked question from readers is why don't we report what happened on the Tasman Bridge yesterday when someone either tried to jump off or in fact did, and my answer always is that unless the effect is such that it caused major disruption to the city - and I think there were only two in recent times where it has - we are not reporting it, because there is no public benefit and there is no public effect from that death, apart from the effect on the family.

**Mr FINCH** - Did you say something occurred yesterday?

**Mr BAILEY** - It is a commonly asked question. If there is a delay on the bridge, peak hour or whatever, people always ring us and ask what is going on. We will certainly tell them on the phone that the police are negotiating with someone on top of the bridge. The bridge has this urban myth about it that people are tossing themselves off every day. It is just ludicrous. One of the reasons I have really stood very firm on not reporting incidents on the bridge is for that very reason. We don't want to give it any currency, because at the end of the day the news judgment is 'what is the wider effect on the community?' Now if the bridge is blocked or closed for an incident of that nature for hours and there are major disruptions to traffic, then we have some obligation to tell people why, as do the authorities. But we have couched it in terms such as 'police were negotiating with a person and after five hours they climbed down'. I think we have been much more open in the past five years. I am just going back through the files where we



have mentioned the bridge, and it is the most talked-about position when you are talking about suicide.

**Mr FINCH** - I have had reported to me that it averages out to one a week jumping off there.

**Mr BAILEY** - I have seen no statistics of that.

**Mr FINCH** - But the Coroner's Office here said there have been six to eight deaths in the whole time the bridge has been up there.

**Mr BAILEY** - We have reported a couple of inquests where one person did suicide by jumping off the bridge. I have copies of these, just to remind myself. There was a very significant story, I thought, very much a break-through story not just for us but I think for the community and for the family concerned. It was written by a freelancer called Yvette Barry, who was in fact a journalism student, and we ran it in the *Sunday Tasmanian* in November last year. It was about a man called David Jacobson, and the intro was that he rode his bike to the top of the Tasman Bridge, locked it to a light pole and jumped. Now how is that for gaining your attention? We thought long and hard about that. We went over this for three weeks. We edited the hell out of this just to make it right, to get the tone right, and this was with the full support of his family. They wanted to tell the story, because there was the wider issue, not just as we saw it, but the treatment available, how authorities reacted to this case.

I have never had a better reaction to an emotional story like that. I think we only got two letters critical of us, and there was this great outpouring of support for the family, for their courage in talking about it, and for their courage generally in talking about the suicide issue above and beyond what happened to their own family member. I think it has been a bit of a break-through. I think we are now more open about it. We are still agonising about it as these issues arise, but I think when I think you have the community prepared to talk about it then you have to be guided. That is my job. I have to have this antenna to tell me, 'What is the community thinking? What is their attitude to this? Are they prepared to really talk openly about it?' Increasingly, I think they are. There is no better example than the fact that you are sitting here asking people questions about it. Surely now is the time to really get serious about it. We wrote an editorial about it earlier this year, in March. I quote - and they are not my words, they are Norman Andrews who writes most of the editorials but with my guidance - 'It is time for suicide and the weight of numbers alone to be rated a public health priority' and I am sure other people have told you that. 'It is time to begin dispelling the myths that surround it' and you only dispel a myth by -

**Mr WHITELEY** - Demystifying it.

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes, exposing it to the cold light of day.

**CHAIR** - Would you see then the paper's position being on one side to not report and not use the word 'suicide' when it is simply a matter of someone committing the act but, on the other hand, to facilitate the debate into the issues surrounding suicide. So it is two quite separate matters.

**Mr BAILEY** - Two quite separate matters, yes. I think you can quite openly talk about the issue of suicide and we have increasingly. The statistics are so disturbing. The statistics are obviously one of the reasons why this committee has been established, particularly for older males.

**CHAIR** - It is a moving cohort, Garry, which is the interesting thing about it. A few years ago it was the 15 to 24 age group and now it is the same group getting older.

**Mr BAILEY** - That is right. Clearly the community needs to talk about that and they will be taking their lead from our elected representatives. Hopefully we can have a significant role in that. We already have simply by telling their stories and that is the best way to get the public engaged is by telling these often disturbing stories - they are irresistible if they have the full support of the families and in every case they seem to.

**CHAIR** - How was your feedback after the stories about the two women who left the psychiatric ward at the Royal and subsequently committed suicide? There was a coronial inquiry about it. Did you get much feedback on that?

**Mr BAILEY** - We did. We were somewhat limited at the time of the feedback because between the evidence and then the coroner's finding you are somewhat limited. We had a number of letters - I can't remember how many and I haven't looked them up. I did put in the words 'suicide prevention Tasmania' in our database and came up with 285 entries in two years so that alone says lots of people are talking about it.

Just an interesting one, it is anecdotal and a bit of a straw poll, we conducted a survey amongst our young readers who are members of our Attitude Club. We have this club for 14 to 18 year olds and they get lots of prizes and discounts and all the rest. We asked them about the things that most concern them, because we are looking at the content of 'Attitude' which runs every Friday. One of the things that was revealed was that they are concerned about their friends who may be depressed or have tried to hurt themselves and on a couple of occasions they did use the words 'suicide' or 'tried to commit suicide'. If people of that age group are thinking about it and talking about it quite openly then I think there is a huge capacity now, a great opportunity for the community to really tackle this head on.

**Mr WHITELEY** - Because the last generation wouldn't talk about it.

**Mr BAILEY** - We wouldn't talk about it, no. I grew up not talking about it and I am sure that perhaps everyone around this table did.

**CHAIR** - There was a pretty long list of the things we didn't talk about actually.

**Mr BAILEY** - Exactly, and some we still don't talk about.

*Laughter.*

**CHAIR** - There is a challenge for you.

**Mr BAILEY** - What I did when I was 18.

**Mr BEST** - Looking at the list from the Press Council, I see the quote: 'The council believes that most papers are aware of the desirability of treating suicide with restraint and avoiding adding to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased'. Next on the list is copy-cat suicides or self-harm and then it goes on with a few others. You said that in an isolated instance that you couldn't see the point necessarily of reporting that event but, again, its relationship to the populace and how it might impact and be important had to be considered. I know that is pretty subjective, but obviously you must have a view in your own mind as to how you rate that. That would probably be from a community interest point of view?

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes.

**Mr BEST** - Your job is to sell papers, though, isn't it?

**Mr BAILEY** - Not only to sell papers, no. What Jack said about the biggest spikes is absolutely right. If you think sensationalism sells the *Mercury*, our biggest spike in the last two years was the celebration of 200 years of the settlement of Tasmania. It was fantastic, it sold a motza, it went crazy. I now have this Everest on the circulation graph to get over.

**Mr BEST** - But that is really what it is about, the circulation graph and then the balance of reporting in a responsible way?

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes, it is all that. It is to advance the public good as well, and there are many examples of that. I could spend hours here telling you what they were, but that would take me way outside the ambit of your inquiry.

**Mr BEST** - Why would promote certain things? For example, there was a prominent case of a member of parliament whose daughter was raped. I had not been here that long at that stage - it might have been before your time - but it featured on the front page for a couple of days. I could not understand why on earth a paper would choose to do that and put that family and that young girl through that.

**Mr BAILEY** - In this case, of course, it was the girl herself who took a civil action. In fact, there have been two women who have taken civil action because they believed that the investigations by police were inadequate and that the evaluation of the evidence by the DPP was inadequate so they took their own cases. These women were no shrinking violets. They came out and showed great courage in taking to court the person they say raped them. That is worthy of reporting, by any medium, I think.

**Mr BEST** - But I think your reporting did traumatise it more than was necessary.

**Mr BAILEY** - Do you know that?

**Mr BEST** - That was the feedback I had received via family people.

**Mr BAILEY** - From the family?

**Mr BEST** - Not direct, but through acquaintances. I might be incorrect, I do not know. That is the feedback I received. It was not direct from the family, no. But there are instances like that and I just wonder what the benefit is.

**Mr BAILEY** - The benefit is that it shows that there is a capacity within the law for people to take other actions should the criminal system fail them. The most fundamental thing is to have transparency within our judicial system, surely, and to not report that case, I think, would be a dereliction of the newspaper's duty.

**Mr BEST** - No-one suggests that, though. I am not suggesting that you not report it; I am saying it was the way you did it.

**Mr BAILEY** - We did it no other way than report the evidence because if we did not do it absolutely to the letter of the law we would be in contempt of that court. I can only recall two occasions on which our newspaper has been in contempt of court and they have both for an error rather than a deliberate overstepping of the line.

**Mr BEST** - I suppose it is style versus content.

**Mr BAILEY** - You are talking about style and what particularly offends you as an individual.

**Mr BEST** - No, not necessarily. It is my concern for the community in that regard.

**Mr BAILEY** - I have the same concerns and I have to exercise them every day.

**Mr FINCH** - Garry, can I ask a question linking up with what Brenton has highlighted? Could you give me some idea of how the *Mercury* goes about handling a story such as those cases, but perhaps a suicide one, where you want to try to make sure that you are adopting the right approach? If these are not the rules, do you have protocols yourself or does that rest with you in how the paper approaches it? How closely would you work with the journalist assigned to that story to oversee the work? Do you just assign the story and then away it goes or do you want to keep a closer watch on it?

**Mr BAILEY** - The first question you always ask - and it is not just on this subject - is 'What is the public benefit to reporting this?'. I come back to the point I made: if there is no wider impact than simply the death of an individual, and therefore an impact on the family, then we treat a suicide no differently from a death by natural causes. There is absolutely no public benefit to reporting it. There is certainly no public interest in it.

If, however, a suicide results in a coronial inquiry where the coroner is sitting in a court and taking evidence and suddenly there are wider issues at play, such as the security in a psychiatric ward, the level of treatment by health authorities, then it is a wider issue. You cannot avoid reporting it. You do the public benefit test then clearly there is a public benefit in reporting this because it may reveal a failure in a system - the health system or the legal system - which ought to be addressed, otherwise this could happen again.

There is no better example of that than the deaths in custody inquiry where every day newspapers around Australia reported on suicides by Aboriginals. Millions of dollars

were spent. We had the same debate here about Risdon and hanging points. I am sure the words, 'hanging points' and 'suicides' probably used by members of this Parliament in debating Risdon, for example, and things were changed.

Again, the essential test is what is the public benefit. There was absolute public benefit in reporting deaths in custody; there was some huge national inquiry. It was a national scandal. We could not ignore it.

Where the line blurs a bit is that there is some public impact as a result of a suicide. How widespread it is? What will be the likely effects down the track? I have to gaze into this crystal ball and try to figure that out - that is the only guidance I have. What will happen? Invariably I will take the very conservative view and say it is not for me to predict what might happen as a result of this suicide, let's not report it. If at some future date there is some public issue as a result of that suicide then perhaps it will be raised again but not by us.

You will not find in our newspaper stories on suicides. If there were 80-odd deaths last year from suicide you could not say, 'You find me the stories, you find 80 stories in the *Mercury* or indeed any Tasmanian newspaper about them'. You won't - unless there are other things related to them, such as a murder or a siege, which we start reporting before anyone is killed and then someone may well take their own life as a result of it.

**Mr WHITELEY** - Just on that though, I suppose we have our own pecuniary interest as members of parliament. Let's take the recent case in point of John Brogden and Jack referred to it bipartisanly - it has happened across all political spectrums. There was no crime - and I am not trying to take a partisan view; we could talk about other members - but there was no murder, there was no criminal activity. He was the Leader of the New South Wales Opposition so he was a public figure, but how fuzzy do those lines get?

**Mr BAILEY** - Very fuzzy.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I suppose you could go out from this room and say, 'Of course, you have a pecuniary interest'. To me that must have been a very difficult call. I struggled with it a little however -

**Mr BEST** - He had said publicly, that he was sorry for what he had said. Surely that was enough.

**Mr WHITELEY** - Yes, thanks Brenton.

**Mr BEST** - But obviously it wasn't because it didn't tell.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I am just trying to get a handle on that. I use a case which, thankfully, did not result in anyone taking their own life. We hear a lot about 'suicide watch'. It becomes obvious. Let's take Wayne Carey, for example - I am a Carlton supporter, so it doesn't matter! Obviously it was notable to everyone, including the press, the authorities, his family and whatever, that this guy was in trouble, whether we liked what he did or not. We all started talking and the press started reporting that he was on suicide watch. Surely that should have sent a pretty definite message to all of us that enough is

enough. Where is enough enough when it comes to people who stick their head up in public?

**Mr BAILEY** - As I think David Penberthy, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, said, you cannot operate on the basis that someone is going to kill themselves as a result of your story - you just do not know.

**Mr WHITELEY** - But if they are put on suicide watch, that should be a pretty definite signal, shouldn't it?

**Mr BAILEY** - It should be but in the Carey case there was this overwhelming public interest.

**Mr WHITELEY** - Public interest and public benefit are two different things.

**Mr BAILEY** - They are, that is why I use the term 'public benefit'. I do not like to use the term 'in the public interest' because people get confused with it being interesting and it is two entirely different things.

**Mr WHITELEY** - We always like to look in someone else's closets and cupboards.

**Mr BAILEY** - A lot of things that are in the public interest are dead dull - they are not interesting at all.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I do not want to make this an issue on a particular case but what is the public benefit of some of these stories. Yes, it is interesting and we are all gossips at heart, I suppose, and everyone wants to know everyone else's business.

**Mr BAILEY** - In the Carey case it was Carey who revealed all. It was not as a result of an investigation by any media group. He had been caught red-handed and he confessed very publicly and therefore there was a massive public interest in it. The public benefit? I suppose I could get on my really high horse, which I usually keep back at the office, but you can always say that -

**Mr WHITELEY** - It is a transportable one, is it?

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes, it is. You can always say that with people who are high profile sportsmen, in particular - and it is a reasonable argument - their responsibilities in everything they do are so much greater. They are being paid huge amounts of money. They are being paid that huge amount of money because of the public adulation and the public adulation is greatly enhanced by the reporting on television, radio and in the newspapers. They benefit gigantically from the reporting of it by us so it is very difficult then for a figure of that stature to then turn around and say, 'Wait a minute, my life as a footballer to my benefit has been really public for 15 years, I'm sorry it's not public any more'. Where do you draw the line? That is a tough one.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I accept that, it is a tough one.

**Mr BEST** - But then the question is about life and sport, isn't it, because the benefit there is that this has been about sports, not about a person's life.

**Mr BAILEY** - The two are inexorably entwined when you are paid that amount of money. Many sportsmen clearly believe they are our role models and the great majority of them exercise that very responsibly. They see it as part of their duty, they see it as part of the deal in being paid so much and having that high profile, and very many of them do exercise that very responsibly. The very best example is Pat Rafter - an absolute stand-out.

**Mr WHITELEY** - I suppose my question was - and thanks for that, that goes a fair way to it - the interest benefit. Let us take the most recent one, the Brogden case, where he had made his own comments about what had happened and resigned - okay, that is fine, that is in the public interest, I accept that. I would have to be convinced that past that point, activities post that, were fair game for us all - I would struggle with that.

**Mr BAILEY** - I think every editor would struggle with that. The day after it, I struggled with it. I read David Penberthy's pretty eloquent defence of what he did and he had some support. Then there is the story about Brogden's behaviour the day after he resigned - the jury is still out on that one. Let us say that story did not happen but Brogden was in such a mental state that he did contemplate suicide or, in fact, tried it. Because of the fact he is such a public figure and it happened only a day or two after his resignation, then that clearly had to be reported - that alone. The fuzzy area is the story that many people say might have prompted him to do it.

**CHAIR** - That is a different question.

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes, a different question.

**Mr MORRIS** - What follows on nicely from that was from Jack talking about - and it happened in the Brogden case - is where the television is adding the Lifeline numbers or suicide phone numbers to the end of the stories. Have you done that with -

**Mr BAILEY** - We do that as a matter of policy.

**Mr MORRIS** - You do have a policy.

**Mr BAILEY** - Always have, yes. We wrote one in October last year. We mentioned Lifeline's 24-hour counselling and I think we do Kids' Help Line as well now.

**Mr MORRIS** - Right, okay.

**Mr BAILEY** - We do that as a matter of course.

**Mr WHITELEY** - It is usually right at the end though, Garry, isn't it?

**Mr BAILEY** - It is always at the end in bold. We got a lot of very good feedback. I come back to the very long feature we wrote in the *Sunday Tasmanian* about David Jacobson taking his own life by jumping off the bridge. We ran a substantial sidebar to it about schizophrenia for a start and the help available and we listed Suicide Prevention Medical Specialist Information; Mental Health Help Line; Suicide and Support after Suicide; Life

Links Samaritans, which is in Launceston; Youth Suicide Action Group, Launceston; Life Line Kids Help Line and we had the phone numbers and the web sites.

**Mr MORRIS** - Do you get any feedback from them as to whether they get a particular bunch of calls.

**Mr BAILEY** - There doesn't seem to be a spike after them. It is a steady stream.

**Mr MORRIS** - So you are doing it as a precautionary measure as much as anything.

**Mr BAILEY** - We did it because they asked us to. Life Line asked us to - 15 years ago, it is a long time.

**Mr MORRIS** - But it is not necessarily proven to be assisting in the reduction of suicide.

**Mr BAILEY** - I don't think you could say that, no, in merely just putting out a few numbers.

**Mr BEST** - It is a good thing to do, though.

**Mr BAILEY** - Yes.

**CHAIR** - I have a couple of questions. The first one was the comments you have made about policy at the *Mercury*. Could you say that was reasonably generic for the television, radio and the other newspapers?

**Mr BAILEY** - I would think so from my observations with the other newspapers and certainly television and radio - well radio, apart from the ABC, you don't really have much in the way of news services out of radio.

**Mr WHITELEY** - The tele stations are pretty good, they usually whack up an ad.

**Mr BAILEY** - That is right.

**CHAIR** - The other point was that what people are doing for the guidelines and everything seems to be based on the premise that there is an attitude in the community that reporting on suicide is potentially a dangerous thing to do. If research was to indicate that there was a different role the media could play, do you think they would be willing to do so - perhaps change it and report more if research supported that?

**Mr BAILEY** - I wouldn't be moved on our fundamental policy that unless a suicide had a greater effect beyond the death of one person in a traumatised family then we wouldn't report them. Essentially if we did that we would have to report every death by natural causes. What is the difference really? It is not a crime. It is a crime to assist. It can't be a crime as you have no-one to charge.

**Mr BEST** - I think it could be said that the policy at the *Mercury* worked pretty well. From a few groups we have heard I think you did get a bit of an endorsement about the way you report on suicide in particular.



**Mr BAILEY** - We have been very open to suggestions about how we should do this because it is so sensitive and we have done this in a lot of other areas too. In a lot of our medical reporting if there are help lines for all manner ailments then we publish them at every opportunity. When we did our anti-smoking campaign the Quit Line was there on every story.

**Mr FINCH** - Just remind me, Garry, of the story that you won an award for at the big Suicide Prevention Association Conference in Sydney.

**Mr BAILEY** - That was a terrific story. That was by a young reporter, Kane Young, and it was a story about a man who they used to call the Dancing Man in Hobart - a real character.

**CHAIR** - I remember that.

**Mr BAILEY** - There was a case where people were asking what had happened to Anthony and we felt it was our responsibility to tell them and this massive outpouring of concern and sadness that this odd-ball character, who entertained so many people in his own way, had committed suicide. People weren't aware that this seemingly happy figure could have such demons. We were criticised by people, roundly criticised and on talk-back radio, not for the fact that we reported his suicide but for the fact that we highlighted what they thought was a very ordinary life and that it shouldn't have occupied so many column centimetres in the newspaper. That was the criticism of us. He was better known and will be - you will remember the Dancing Man when all of us, particularly me, will all disappear. He will be remembered. I always say this: it is the odd ball characters who are remembered.

**CHAIR** - We have a few of those as well.

*Laughter.*

**CHAIR** - Do any other members have questions they would like to ask?

**Mr BAILEY** - I hope that is useful.

**CHAIR** - It was very much, thank you. We will be putting out a written report so we will send you a copy.

**Mr BAILEY** - Terrific, and we will be reporting on it - absolutely.

**CHAIR** - Our last report, if I have the dates right, was the one on custodial grandparents. That got a lot of terrific coverage.

**Mr BAILEY** - It remains a big issue.

**CHAIR** - The role of this committee really was just to get it into the spotlight as much as anything else, which I think did. Thank you very much.

**THE WITNESS WITHDREW.**