



LAW COMMISSION

TE AKA MATUA O TE TURE

MEDIA RELEASE

31 March 2014

Hon Sir Grant Hammond KNZM
President
Law Commission

LAW COMMISSION RECOMMENDS REVISED LIMITS ON THE CURRENT RESTRICTIONS FOR SUICIDE REPORTING

The Law Commission is recommending revising the restrictions in the Coroners Act 2006 regarding reporting suicide. The new restrictions would be limited to public comment by any person of the method of the suicide death, the place of the suicide where it is suggestive of the method and the fact that the death is a suicide. However, a death would be able to be described as “suspected suicide” where that is supported by the facts.

It is recommended that other aspects of suicide reporting by the media should be the subject of a new set of voluntary reporting standards to be prepared by the Minister of Health in consultation with mental health experts and representatives of the media.

The recommendations are contained in the Law Commission’s Report, *Suicide Reporting* (NZLC R131) which was tabled in the House of Representatives today.

New Zealand has over 500 suicide deaths each year. While most of those do not attract widespread media attention, quite a few do, sometimes of an intense kind. The current restrictions contained in the Coroners Act 2006 reflect the concern that publication of descriptions of those deaths may lead to copycat suicides or undermine the coronial process.

The purpose of the Commission’s review was to examine whether the current restrictions strike the appropriate balance between the public health goal of reducing the likelihood of copycat suicide and the principle of freedom of expression.

The Commission reviewed the research examining that copycat effect. Law Commission President Sir Grant Hammond said that body of evidence is large and significant:

“There are now more than 80 scientific studies worldwide examining the association between media coverage of suicide and further suicidal behaviour. While there are some differences between them, they show widespread agreement that media depictions of suicide may precipitate suicidal behaviour

in vulnerable people. In particular, they show that vulnerable people may be susceptible to descriptions of the method of suicide.”

The Commission considers that the current restrictions in the Coroners Act 2006 have not been effective. A particular problem is that the scope of the restrictions on reporting suicide is unclear. For example, there is debate as to whether every detail of the suicide death is restricted by the current legislation or just the method of that death. That uncertainty is undesirable and has, in some cases, inhibited positive, open discussion of suicide generally.

The Commission considers that broad legislative restrictions on reporting suicide cannot be justified as a reasonable limitation on freedom of expression under the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990. While the evidence of a copycat effect from reporting suicide is large and significant enough for people to take heed and voluntarily curb their behaviour, it is only the reporting of the method of suicide and the fact that the death is a suicide that can be justified as legislative prohibitions.

Other aspects of suicide reporting that may lead to copycat behaviour, such as sensationalising, normalising or glamorising suicide should be the subject of a new set of reporting standards for media. The Commission is recommending that the Minister of Health leads the process of developing those standards, as well as disseminating, promoting, supporting and evaluating them.

Sir Grant said, “Previously much effort has gone into the development of guidelines in New Zealand but agreement between the different interest groups has been difficult to achieve. We are optimistic that a more clearly confined legislative prohibition and strong leadership from the Minister of Health will produce a new context under which the process of reaching agreement on a new set of standards will be successful.”

-ENDS-

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