

What are the current restrictions on reporting suicide?

If a death appears to have been self-inflicted the Coroners Act 2006 states that, unless the coroner agrees, no one can make public any information about the manner in which a death occurred until the inquiry into the death has been completed.

If a coroner has found the death was self-inflicted, the only information that can be made public without the coroner's authority is the person's name, address, occupation and the fact that the coroner has found the death to be self-inflicted.

A coroner can only allow information to be made public if the coroner considers it is "unlikely to be detrimental to public safety".

The restrictions may be difficult to enforce when information is made available on social media.

Why are the restrictions in place?

Some research shows a link between media reporting and imitative or copycat suicide and it is thought that restrictions on reporting are necessary to prevent suicide among individuals who are already at risk of suicide and might be negatively influenced. Some research also suggests that media reporting can have a role in facilitating suicide clusters and could encourage public perception that suicide is an appropriate response to a life stress.

Why are the restrictions being reviewed?

In 2012 the Ministry of Justice conducted a targeted review of the Coroners Act 2006. A concern was raised that the restrictions on media reporting of suicide were unclear, and did not recognise the growing role of social media.

Why not simply make the law clearer?

There are different views on reporting of suicide, and there are likely to be differences of opinion on what the scope of the restrictions should be. For example, some people consider that removing the reporting restrictions altogether and allowing open discussion about individual suicide deaths would help reduce the rate of suicide in New Zealand. Others are concerned that research continues to show a link between media reporting and imitative or copycat suicide and believe that some restriction on reporting is appropriate.

To navigate between these two views and make sure that any change made serves the aim of reducing deaths, it was decided that a more comprehensive review, consulting with groups such as media and researchers, was appropriate.

Why is the Law Commission doing the review?

The Law Commission is well placed to undertake a first principles review of the media restrictions because it is independent from Government and also has expertise in the difficulties in regulating social media.

What will the Law Commission do?

The Law Commission will consider the different viewpoints and make recommendations to the Government about what the legislation should say.

Is there a Terms of Reference for the Review?

This is still being developed, in consultation with the Law Commission.

When will the Law Commission issue its report?

The Law Commission's report is due by the end of March 2014.

What does the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy say about media reporting of suicide?

One of the seven goals of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Strategy 2006–2016 is to promote the safe reporting and portrayal of suicidal behaviour by the media. More information about suicide prevention and the strategy is available at <http://www.spin.org.nz>

What guidance is available to the media on reporting suicide?

Guidelines for journalists reporting on suicides have been developed by a roundtable of key stakeholders including representatives of the news media and mental health professionals. They have been adopted by the Newspaper Publishers' Association and the Media Freedom Committee. The full guidelines can be found at: www.health.govt.nz/publication/reporting-suicide-resource-media