

Case study 6

Sharks on land: A South Australian family's grief

In June 1993, Therese Cartwright, mother of five (including quadruplets), was taken by a shark while scuba diving with her husband and some friends off the South Australian coast. Only remains of her body were recovered. The victim's husband Ian Cartwright and the five children were on the boat when the tragedy occurred. After the attack, Mr Cartwright tried to shield his family from the media to lessen their grief. The media reported his wife's demise in graphic detail, reporting which body parts had been recovered. Mr Cartwright was naturally upset by the graphic nature of the material published and requested privacy. The media that filmed the man in obvious distress at his wife's funeral ignored this. The children knew exactly what was in their mother's coffin.

The grieving husband also had to handle inaccurate reporting of issues irrelevant to the death of his wife. The media insinuated an untruth: that his wife was on an in vitro program by which she had had her quadruplets. At the funeral, the media ignored Mr Cartwright's plea for privacy. Church members had to fend off photographers, television crews, and reporters who tried to enter. As the family was driving away, camera lenses were focused on the inside of the car in an attempt to get footage of the distressed husband in tears. He received thirty to forty calls a day from the media who were trying to contact him for his story. ABC television came to his house and spoke to a lady who told them Mr Cartwright wanted no contact with the media. The television crew then left, but not before filming the washing line with the babies' nappies on it. A prominent women's magazine and a commercial television channel both offered Mr Cartwright a substantial sum of money for his story.

After being counselled that he had no right to refuse these offers for the sake of his children, he refused them on the grounds that it would feel like prostitution to make money out of his wife's death. Looking back, Mr Cartwright believes the media made the death of his wife even harder to cope with. Mr Cartwright says the media:

... generated pressure which made me less able to cope with my grief, and reading in the gutter press a description of how your wife has been torn apart is the most distressing thing, it aroused emotions in me I didn't know I had.

Quoted in Gillespie 1993

Issues and questions raised by case study 6

- 1 If a person in grief doesn't want to talk to you, what can you do?
- 2 A death-knock is just an excuse for trying to show someone under extreme emotional distress. Discuss.
- 3 Is the death-knock really worth all the bother it usually causes on all sides?
- 4 As we've seen in an earlier context, family members at a funeral can attack journalists covering the event. What would you do under the circumstances?
- 5 Is there a discreet way of behaving in such trying circumstances?
- 6 What if a member of your family became suddenly 'famous' and was 'hounded' by the media. What could you do to help?
- 7 Wouldn't common decency dictate that when asked, you leave people to their grief?
- 8 What part of that wouldn't your chief of staff understand?
- 9 Is there a case for all media agreeing to leave grieving relatives alone?
- 10 Do you think all sections of the media would abide by the agreement?

Bibliography:

Gillespie, Iain. 1993. 'Without Fear or Favour.' SBS TV.