

Jermaine Pennant through solicitors Huggins & Lewis Foskett v The People

Clauses noted: 1

Mr Jermaine Pennant complained to the Press Complaints Commission through Huggins & Lewis Foskett solicitors that an article headlined "England ace's mum is hooker" and "England ace's mum is secret £60 hooker", published in The People on 3rd August 2003, was misleading in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code.

The complaint was rejected.

The article reported how Colleen Palmer, the "long term partner" of England football player Jermaine Pennant's father, was a prostitute. Mr Pennant's solicitors objected to the use of the term "mum" – in both headlines and the first paragraph of the article – to describe a woman who was not Mr Pennant's biological mother but merely the former girlfriend of his father. This was particularly serious, and particularly misleading, as Mr Pennant's real mother – as reported in the article – had died in February of this year. The solicitors considered that the piece was a deliberately misleading attempt to sell newspapers.

The newspaper did not accept that the piece was in any way misleading. It pointed especially to two statements, in the first and penultimate columns of the article respectively, that Ms Palmer had raised Mr Pennant only "from the age of six" and that his "real mum" had sadly died of cancer. It considered that no reader of the piece as a whole – bearing in mind that all headlines must be read in conjunction with the attached article – could be in doubt that Ms Palmer was not Mr Pennant's biological mother. In any case, the newspaper also indicated that the term mum was an acceptable shorthand term for the person fulfilling a maternal role and submitted evidence to the Commission (in the form of photographs of Mr Pennant and Ms Palmer) that Ms Palmer had played such a role in the upbringing of Mr Pennant. That notwithstanding, it expressed regret for having caused any additional distress to the complainant in light of the death of his biological mother.

The complainant's solicitors made clear that Mr Pennant has not ever referred to Ms Palmer as his mother, or even step-mother, and does not accept that the relationship could be characterised in that way.

Adjudication

The Commission – while expressing its sympathy to the complainant for the loss of his mother and fully acknowledging his understandable reaction to this article – was bound to assess this complaint under the terms of the Code. In reaching a decision, it emphasised that it must always have regard to an article in its entirety before coming to a decision as to its accuracy and, particularly, that headlines must be considered in conjunction with the attached text.

In this context, the Commission noted that, although Ms Palmer was described as the complainant's mum in both headlines and the first paragraph of the article, a number of other references made clear in the text that she was not the complainant's biological mother. The piece, when read as a whole, was not therefore significantly distorted or misleading and the Commission concluded that there was no breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code.

The Commission, however, regretted the newspaper's continued and unqualified use of the word mum in the first paragraph of the article, which, in its view, represented – although not a breach of the Code – an error of judgement.

Relevant rulings

Field MP v The Independent, 2000

Adjudication issued 2003