



by **Ross Clark**

**N**O PARENT would have anything but sympathy for Vincent and Sharon Pritchard, whose son Nathaniel last week became one of the 17 young people in Bridgend to take their lives in little more than a year. They deserve respect and the peace which they have requested.

Whether the South Wales police should be so keen to echo Mr and Mrs Pritchard's assertion that the media contributed to their son's death by "glamorising ways of taking your life" is another matter.

On Tuesday, following the latest death of 16-year-old Jenna Parry, who apparently hanged herself, the assistant chief constable David Morris called an extraordinary press conference in which he all but laid the blame for the suicides at the door of the media. A number of the suicides, he accepted, "had access to social networking sites but there's no suggestion that anybody used these sites as a means to take their lives. There are a constellation of factors influencing these young people. Young people tell us that the media coverage is starting to contribute to those pressures."

Assistant chief constable Morris's accusation that the media reporting is responsible for the Bridgend suicide cluster is a feeble attempt to blame the messenger. His stance also ignores one obvious fact: that the suicides began in January 2007 – months before the story was picked up. By this January, at least 12 people had already taken their lives. It is pathetic and dishonest of South Wales police to deny that

### 'Suppressing honest reporting of these events won't achieve anything'

social networking sites have anything to do with the deaths. Take the case of Natasha Randall, 17, who killed herself in January: within hours, friends had set up a website called RIP Tasha which by the next day had received 2,100 visitors. Within 24 hours two of her friends had also attempted suicide – all before the story had even reached the press.

**R**EPORTING does sometimes break the boundaries of taste and decency. All of us who work in the media have a responsibility to consider the consequences of what we write and, in the case of the families of suicide victims, this duty becomes especially acute. Yet reading the many words written in the press about the Bridgend suicides over the past month, I struggle to find anything which in any way glorifies suicide.

On the contrary, the impression given is one of a tragic waste of young lives. The coverage has included much debate on how we should counter the risk of suicide in young people and brought much exposure to charities which work with our youth. We will never know how many people wrestling with mental illness have found help as a result of the coverage on Bridgend, nor how many parents have been alerted to their children's use of networking sites.

The issue of copycat suicides and media reporting has been controversial since 1987 when the Austrian media was alerted to the possibility that a three-year spate of suicides on Vienna's metro might have been encouraged by lurid reporting on the deaths.

The city's papers were persuaded to wind down their coverage of subsequent deaths and during the following six months the number of suicides on the metro system fell by 80 per cent – although there was a lesser fall in the city's overall suicide rate.

Studies of what happened in Vienna are frequently cited by the world's "suicidologists" and led to many newspapers adopting policies which restricted their cover-

age of suicides. Although the experience of Singapore suggests another solution might have been appropriate: there, the authorities cut the suicide rate on the metro to zero by installing doors between the platform and train, which open only when the train has arrived.

Yet on a national scale there is little to suggest that the refusal of the media to report suicides achieves any reduction in deaths. The Norwegian media observes a rigid code which states "suicide should never be given any mention" – giving casual visitors to Norway the impression that no Norwegian ever takes his life. The statistics suggest otherwise: that the Norwegian media is sweeping under the carpet an acute suicide problem. In Norway, 17.7 males and 6.9 females per 100,000 population per year kill themselves. By comparison, the suicide rate in

Britain where suicide is openly reported is 11 males and 3.3 females per 100,000 population.

Here, the press watchdog advises that it is legitimate to report suicide but excessive detail about the method should not be given.

**T**HE trouble with covering up reporting of suicides is that you cover up all kinds of other things, too. If British newspapers followed the same code as the Norwegian press, we would never have known about the four soldiers who died at Deepcut Barracks in Surrey between 1995 and 2002 – all recorded as suicides by Army inquiries. We would never have known of the doubts regarding the deaths, nor about the bullying alleged by their families.

With due respect to Vincent and Sharon Pritchard, their views on media coverage of suicides are unlikely to be shared by the parents of the Deepcut soldiers whose fight to have the deaths properly investigated has been greatly aided by a media campaign.

Neither are their views shared by many other families who have lost people to suicide and who have been happy to share their memories with the press because they want loved ones to be remembered.

Do we really want a society where police can put reporters off a story involving a death in custody simply by telling them that it was a suicide? Covering up the facts about deaths merely leads to false speculation. Without the coverage there would be plenty of rumours surrounding the Bridgend deaths but it would be hard for anyone to get the facts. Even though it is at

record low levels in Britain, no one should make light of suicide. We are also fortunate in Britain to have available modern antidepressant drugs and a huge number of charities that offer support. Suppressing honest reporting of suicide, however, won't achieve anything other than to conceal the nature and scale of the problem. It is baffling to all of us why healthy young people with their lives ahead of them should succumb to the ephemeral "glory" of an internet tribute page.

"Don't bottle it up," brooding individuals are often told. The same is true on a national scale. It would be untrue to say that nobody ever commits suicide because they want to emulate someone they read about in the press but, ultimately, only by writing and talking about suicide can we hope to save young lives.



**PRESS CONFERENCE:** Assistant chief constable David Morris. Inset: The latest victim Jenna Parry

# 17 suicides in one town but a police chief says the media is to blame