

# Further changes to suicide reporting proposed

Updated at 5:48 pm on 4 August 2015

MPs have backed a significant change to the Coroners Act to allow media to report a death as "suspected suicide".

Other proposed changes include new guidelines for deaths in custody and for armed forces personnel who are killed in action overseas.



Photo: RNZ / Alexander Robertson

The Justice and Electoral Committee yesterday reported back its suggested changes with what it calls some "key amendments".

Currently, the Coroners Act restricts anyone from publishing details relating to a suspected suicide including the method, which aims to prevent copycat suicides. The committee found that did not work well in practice as journalists did not always comply with the restrictions and had "developed terms of innuendo that hint at suicide". The growing popularity of social media also made the restriction more difficult to enforce, it said.

Some submitters wanted restrictions on suicide reporting completely abolished but the committee said it did not want to go that far. Instead, it said it wanted to "narrow" reporting restrictions to the details most likely to lead to copycat behaviour, for example the site of the death and the method. It has recommended allowing journalists to describe a death as a suspected suicide ahead of a coroner's finding - but said reporting any other information could suggest the method of suicide, and should not be allowed.



Policemen at the site of the hot air balloon crash near Carterton in 2012.

Photo: AFP

The Justice and Electoral Committee has also responded to a submission from the parents of Alexis Still, who died in a hot air balloon crash near Carterton in 2012. Vivien and Allen Stills' submission asked that coroners advise family members of their rights at the scene of a death, in terms of touching or viewing the body. The committee acknowledged the anguish Mr and Mrs Still experienced as they waited at the scene of the accident, unable to be with their daughter. But, it said, it considered those difficulties specific to that situation.

#### New proposed guidelines for deaths in custody, armed forces

The committee also considered a proposal to stop coroners conducting inquiries into deaths by "hostile action".

Currently, coroners have the power to look into the death of a defence force member overseas - whatever the circumstances.

The committee recommended amending legislation so coroners would not hold inquiries if they were satisfied a death arose from hostilities in which the Defence Force was engaged.



Photo: RNZ

The proposed bill would also allow coroners to decide whether to conduct an inquest if someone dies in custody, or at any time under the care of the state - currently, it is mandatory.

The committee said it supported the bill's intent to reduce unnecessary inquests. However, it recommended specifying that coroners, when deciding whether or not to hold an inquest, must consider whether a doctor who had access to the person's health information would have expected the death.

### Labour still concerned

The Labour Party said it still had concerns about several aspects of the bill, including removing the requirement to always undertake an inquest into a death while in official custody or care.

It also said "another major source of opposition" was the proposal to stop coroners conducting inquiries into deaths in the New Zealand Defence Force.

Labour said the bill represented a "missed opportunity" and it would not be supporting the bill unless its suggested changes were put in place.