

## Chapter 5      **Single-victim traumatic events** – **deaths in industrial settings**

In her 1999 book *Compassion Fatigue*, American journalism educator Susan Moeller highlights how individual crises tend to pale quickly as far as the media is concerned:

It's difficult for the media and their audience to sustain concern about individual crises over a period of months and maybe even years. Other more decisive – and short-term – events intervene, usurping attention, and meanwhile, little seems to change in the original scenario. There is a reciprocal circularity in the treatment of low-intensity crises: the droning 'same-as-it-ever-was' coverage in the media causes the public to lose interest, and the media's perception that their audience has lost interest causes them to downscale their coverage, which causes the public to believe that the crisis is either over or is a lesser emergency and so on and so on.<sup>238</sup>

In an examination of the impact of news reporting on the victims and survivors of traumatic incidents, it is valuable to consider the situation of families of those killed in sudden, violent circumstances in the workplace. Whether deaths are due to vehicular or equipment accidents, fires or explosions, crush injuries or chemical spills, falls or other causes; whether these deaths are accidental or the result of negligence, families and work colleagues find themselves confronting extremely difficult and unusual circumstances that are beyond their control. Before news media even come into the equation, there is a range of issues thrown up that complicate the grief and bereavement experienced by families, friends and those who worked with the victims.

For many families, the ensuing months, possibly years, can feature extensive police and/or coronial investigations, sometimes protracted civil legal proceedings surrounding issues of compensation and even political wrangling over the facts leading up to the death/s. There may be blunt questions about the degree of contributory negligence by their loved one or their actual state of mind at the time of their death.

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Moeller (1999), P12.

In some cases, families will experience partial or total abrogation of responsibility by employers as well as a sense of being ignored or ineffectual when they try to understand exactly what happened to their loved ones or to have safety, legislative and other issues addressed in a workplace, or in an industry, in order to prevent further deaths.

Colleagues must also deal with some of those issues. They may also have witnessed the death, or felt powerless to prevent the loss of a life. Perhaps their own lives, or those of other colleagues, were also in danger in that instance, or had been previously. They have to deal with the loss of an acquaintance (or maybe a friend), the reaction of their peers, the victim's family and their own families, as well as the nature and extent of any response from their employer. Apart from any rational (or irrational) guilt issues, there is the prospect of involvement in a formal investigation or carrying the blame, even in part, for the death. In such a volatile climate, how, when and to what extent the media cover industrial deaths can impact significantly on victim's families, friends, workmates and the broader community.

While speaking about murder victims and their families, US victim advocate and social scientist Deborah Spungen notes that a 'second wound' can be exacerbated by the depth of coverage or the absence of coverage. The parallels for those people dealing with workplace deaths are evident.

High-profile cases usually involve a well-known person, an intriguing location, or unusual circumstances such as the age of the murder victim. Some homicide cases are relegated to the back pages of a newspaper or a squib (a small news article written without a reporter's byline) or are completely ignored by the press. For many co-victims, that can be equally traumatic. Lack of coverage can make them feel as if a loved one did not count as a human being, that the co-victim's loss was so negligible that it was not worth mentioning.<sup>239</sup>

Members of families that lose a loved one at work tend to react and cope in different ways. While some manage to adjust to the news, others bury their feelings or become hostile. Some will concentrate their energies on ensuring safer workplaces or work practices so that a similar incident does not take another life. Of this latter group, some will become lone lobbyists, others will band together with members of other families who have experienced a similar loss of someone they valued.

#### *About this research cohort*

During October 1999, eight people (two men and six women) participated in a focus group to discuss their loss of a loved one in the workplace. Four of those women subsequently participated in in-depth interviews that form the basis of the four case studies presented in this chapter. Broad demographic information about these participants is available in Appendix 13 of this thesis. Quantitative information about this cohort that relates to the participants interactions with the media is presented below, prior to the four industrial death case studies themselves.

This chapter will examine the experiences of four different Victorian families who have only one connection, their involvement in an advocacy group which itself came about largely because of the erosion of the rights of victims' families to be heard, respected and/or compensated following a workplace death. This group, Industrial Death Support and Advocacy (IDSA), provides understanding and moral support to families who lose a loved one at work, connects them with appropriate resources, lobbies government agencies and authorities about improving investigative and safety procedures, addresses workers about the consequences of workplace deaths and current matters of concern, provides (where requested) support during court cases or inquiries, and seeks media coverage of facts surrounding individual cases and any shortfalls in legislation. IDSA is supported by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association, the Electrical Trades Union, the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, the Australian Metal Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union.

The group's then co-ordinator Liz Horvath Mobayad – whose own father was killed in 1995 while operating a compactor near an embankment on a freeway construction site – said families of workplace fatalities often face enormous frustrations and sometimes take months, even years, to find or seek out help. While each of the four women interviewed for this segment of the research is passionate about understanding and documenting what happened to their families in order to prevent such incidents from happening again, some families – and some family members – elect to take different paths when dealing with their loss.

*Media contact (prior to and since event)*

Prior to their sudden bereavements, three of the four participants had never had any contact with the media, while the fourth (T+4 years) reported frequent contact. Since their bereavements, three of the four participants changed their level of contact with the media. One (T+11 months) had two interviews with the media in the first week after her son's death, another (T+2 years) had started to have occasional contact with the media – about a dozen interviews on matters relating to her partner's death. More recently her focus has moved to issues relating to the lobby and support group IDSA. The third (T+4 years) had experienced slightly less contact with the media (now only 'occasionally'), but interviews had still numbered in the dozens since her father's death. The fourth participant (T+13 years) was a new member of IDSA and had never had any direct contact with the media.

One participant (T+11 months) said the print media had respected her privacy, but television had not, while another (T+2 years) said only sometimes was her privacy respected. With the most experience dealing with the media, one (T+4 years) said she had always had her privacy respected. The fourth participant (T+13 years) had had no direct contact with the media when her son was burned because the hospital handled media liaison throughout the three weeks before he died. However, her family was traumatised by a front page photograph of their burned son run in a Melbourne newspaper.

When it came to the calibre of reports published by the media, the women's opinions were mixed:

- 'fine' (T+11 months);
- 'they got the little things wrong or mixed up' (T+4 years)
- 'I was portrayed as 'weak' at first, now as 'a fighter' ';
- 'they're not always accurate' (T+2 years); and
- 'news coverage of the explosion angered me' (T+13 years).

Their comments on images and sounds used to illustrate reports across various media included:

- 'okay';
- 'often too sensational, distressing when first viewed';
- 'shithouse, I was pushed into a photo'; 'now I'm stronger, I won't have the kids in photos'; and
- '*The Age's* photo (of son) was unnecessary and distressful'.

Participants were asked to rank on a five-point scale (1=distressing, 2=concerning, 3=mixed, 4=fair, and 5=helpful) different types of reports across various media – viz., newspaper stories, newspaper images, magazine stories, magazine images, radio news stories, radio current affairs programs, TV news stories, TV current affairs stories, and TV news or current affairs images and sounds. Strong positive results for certain media – e.g., radio news stories and radio current affairs programs (4.3) and TV current affairs and TV news/current affairs images (4.0) – are more likely to be a factor of the small sample size and the low actual coverage of these industrial deaths.

However, with this indicator, if the results from the Port Arthur and IDSA cohorts are combined, the resultant impressions of news coverage averages 3.0 (mixed). Across individual media types the combined result is:

Radio news stories	3.9
Radio current affairs	3.6
TV current affairs	3.3
Magazine images	3.2
Newspaper stories	2.9
TV news stories	2.8
TV news/current affairs images/sounds	2.8
Newspaper images	2.6
Magazine stories	2.4

Again, more transient news sources appear to score better than more permanent forms. This may be significant, however, given the extremely small size of the sample, caution is advised.

In both instances, however, this may be because stories on radio and television are far shorter than those in print publications, allowing fewer opportunities for mistakes. It may also be that their very transience means listeners or viewers have less opportunity to catch mistakes or offensive coverage that is broadcast but are more easily able to absorb print materials, reflect upon them, share them and access them repeatedly if so desired.

#### *Media regard (prior to and since event)*

Prior to their bereavements, two participants (T+11 months and T+13 years) regarded the media 'moderately well', one (T+2 years) 'rather highly' and one (T+4 years) 'rather poorly'. After the deaths, the two (T+11 months and T+13 years), who had had the least interaction with the media still regarded the media 'moderately well'. However, one of the other participants (T+4 years) improved her regard to 'neutral' and the fourth participant (T+2 years) noted a deterioration from 'rather highly' to 'neutral'.

#### *Regard for comparative agencies*

The small size of this cohort makes it difficult to confirm any patterns of response to this question, other than all four said police had been 'very helpful'. Only one (T+13 years) had had experience with ambulance/rescue personnel and ranked them 'very helpful', only one (T+2 years) had contact with counselling/support agencies and ranked them 'very helpful'. One (T+4 years) ranked all three government levels – local authorities, State Government agencies and Federal Government agencies – as 'rather unhelpful'. Three (T+11 months, T+2 years and T+13 years) did not rank local authorities or Federal Government agencies. Two (T+11 months and T+2 years) agreed State Government agencies had been 'rather unhelpful'.

This strong sentiment against the Victorian Government at the time of the interviews is likely to be related to its then absence of common law appeal following industrial deaths, legislation IDSA was lobbying actively to change. When this research was conducted, IDSA members hoped in the incoming Bracks Labor Government would address legislative and other shortcomings in this area. In 2001, IDSA celebrated the passing of industrial manslaughter legislation and received news from the Bracks Government that its funding would not be continued past the end of the year<sup>240</sup>. At the time that writing of this thesis was concluded, devastated IDSA members were lobbying for that decision to be reversed or for alternative funding.

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240 IDSA Newsletter dated November 2001.

## 5.1 The new boy

### *Background to the traumatic incident*

This section explores the case of Anthony Carrick who was 17 and had just completed a bar course. He was looking for a job in his home area in the western suburbs of Melbourne, but could not get one, according to his mother Jan, a process worker. Her eldest son, Alan, 27, encouraged Anthony to respond to an advertisement posted in the window of a local shop. It was for a job as a truck ‘jockey’ (a worker who helps by loading and unloading goods). Having just employed another young man, Anthony was told he would be called in when needed. A few weeks later, the call came for him to start work the coming Thursday.

On his first day in the job, November 12, 1998, Anthony ducked home for lunch and then was driven to a customer’s site in nearby Footscray with another young man to clean a warehouse where cattle feed was made and distributed. Their employer left the pair at the site to complete the task and arranged to collect them later. Their task was to sweep surplus feed from the edges of the work area – which was surrounded by large, heavy, unsupported concrete slabs used as barriers to contain the feed and deter rodents – in towards the middle of the warehouse floor before a front-end loader came to collect and remove their sweepings. When one of the 2.5m, seven-tonne freestanding walls unexpectedly fell, Anthony was around 1m from it. He was killed and his co-worker received horrific crush injuries that saw him hospitalised for four months.<sup>241</sup>

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At the time Jan Carrick was interviewed for this research, Anthony’s case was about to go to court. She was not able to discuss the fine detail of the incident that claimed his life. However, she said, her family had heard the young man driving the front-end loader had a nervous breakdown following the incident.

*Immediate media coverage*

Call it familial intuition or extremely close family bonds, but when Jan arrived home after work that day, Alan had already heard news of a nearby workplace fatality on the radio and was deeply concerned about his brother's safety. His mother initially dismissed his concerns, but together with middle son Jason, they watched the 5pm television news on Channel 10. Alan went to his room after that report. Later, during the same hour-long news bulletin, two police officers knocked at the door and confirmed Anthony's death:

I opened up the door and saw the police officers standing there and they asked, 'Are you Mrs Carrick?' I said, 'It is not Anthony, don't tell me it is Anthony' and I shut the door. And then Jason opened the door and told them to come in ... they just came in and stood at the door and said, 'I'm sorry'.

The police officers arranged to collect Jan's husband from his workplace and drive him home. They also arranged for colleagues at Frankston to locate and advise their remaining child, a daughter, of her brother's death. A shocked Jan turned on later news bulletins at 6pm and during the evening to see if she could see in any report what her eldest son had seen. On the late news they saw the sort of wall that had fallen, stacked with others in another shed, but not the site of Anthony's death. Jan said she was drawn to the news coverage, looking for answers and trying to piece together what had happened:

... after getting the (Coroner's) reports ... and reading about the way Anthony was laying ... I mean he was squashed flat and I have got images of what I read later and what I saw on the TV and these two images are going together and I can see Anthony lying on that floor. I can see that TV report, but also my mind is slotting Anthony into it, even though you couldn't see Anthony on the floor and they did show the other shed, not the shed that he was in. But, you know, I am juggling images and I can see it.

### *Ongoing media coverage*

Jan admits that when she sees other incidents on television, she experiences flashbacks related to Anthony's death. The hard part, she says, is coming to terms with the way Anthony died in what should have been a safe environment performing such an innocuous task as sweeping. Her middle son, Jason, is in the Army and, at the time of the interview, was about to leave for East Timor:

... if I got a phone call from the Army to say something had happened to Jason – and God help it will never, ever happen, but if it did – I would probably understand that he is doing a very, very dangerous job. I cannot for the life of me think that my youngest son got killed sweeping the floor...

Australia's media cover workplace and other fatalities as they happen, often filling in names and other details in a second report after police release confirmed identities. By and large this does not happen until families have been advised of the death and, in some case, identified the body of a loved one. The risks associated with this sequence of notification and news publication, says Jan, are high:

(It was the) initial shock, that is the thing that has driven so much of my anger. That, you know, this can be put on TV before people are told. No names were mentioned, I realise that, but, I mean, it is there and it was on the radio. People heard it on the radio at 4 o'clock on their way home from work. If I had heard that ... I could have had an accident coming home or anything.

The day after Anthony's death, there was a small news report in the Friday edition of the newspapers. Jan recalls how Robyn Riley, a courteous reporter from the Sunday edition of Melbourne's *Herald-Sun*, called the family to do a longer story about Anthony's death over the telephone. Riley subsequently sent out a photographer to photograph the family and an image of Anthony. Their story ran that weekend, with a half-page photograph, but contained a couple of minor errors that disturbed family members, in particular, middle brother Jason:

What (Riley) wrote was okay, but there were a couple of things in it that I told her she had gotten wrong ... Jason got a bit upset when he was reading it and was saying, 'That wasn't Alan, that was me', or 'What did you say that for?' ... (she) had written that (Anthony) played for St Anthony's cricket club when he actually played for St Andrews ... Actually, I read it and I put it down and I never read it again for quite a long time.

IDSA members saw the story about Anthony Carrick's death and made contact with Jan about a week later. However, in the painful days and weeks that followed, despite the family's best efforts, the Carricks heard little about the detail of what happened from anyone in authority. The police who advised the family of Anthony's death could not tell them much. A year after Anthony's death, WorkCover was still to advise the family of an outcome of its deliberations. Jan said Anthony's employer gave only the barest of details about what had happened in his one and only telephone contact. Her family only became aware of the name and address of the company where Anthony died when they received witness statements from the Coroner:

It may have made it a little bit easier if the employer had said to me on the phone, 'Listen, I am really sorry that this happened, we are all feeling very bad'. Here it was six weeks before Christmas and I am sitting there thinking, 'Well I bet you have a nice Christmas'. I couldn't even get an 'I'm sorry. Is there anything we can do for you? Do you need some help? Would you like some money to help pay for the funeral or anything?' Just for somebody to come up and say, 'Is there anything I can do for you?' ... Nothing, absolutely nothing.

IDSA helped the Carricks approach the Coroner's office, suggesting they ask for copies of all briefs and demand an inquest into the death 'because they said they were not going to do one'.<sup>242</sup>

#### *Positives of media coverage*

When WorkCover 'didn't get around to paying for Anthony's funeral', Jan said she contacted Robyn Riley again. Riley, she said, called Anthony's employer and asked whether the owner had spoken to the family, sent a representative to the funeral, sent flowers or visited the Carricks. The owner's reaction, Jan said, was: 'Nobody told me I had to.' She said Riley also rang WorkCover to check the progress of the Carrick's paperwork. WorkCover responded by contacting Jan almost immediately, as well as the *Herald-Sun* reporter – even before a report was published. A courier delivered a claim form to Jan that same evening and it was collected from her workplace the next morning. WorkCover, Jan added, also tried to have the story pulled, but the story ran anyway.

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More recent changes to Victorian legislation had meant inquests into workplace and accidental deaths were no longer automatic. The legislation has been since tightened further, preventing families from demanding an inquest.

### *Negatives of media coverage*

Later, looking back at the photographs published with Riley's first story nearly a year earlier, Jan described herself and her son as looking 'absolutely dreadful'. She also recognised her obvious vulnerability at that time. She recalled Jason's discomfort, in particular, when the photographs were taken:

The first photo ... was of me holding a photo of Anthony, the second a photo of me and Jason holding the photo. Jason kept asking, 'Why do they want a photo of me?' ... I was looking at them the other day, because I read them initially and then I put them away. I pulled them out the other day, you know, after I rang WorkCover and they finally told me that they were going to prosecute (the employer).

The publication of Riley's second piece preceded several more chance encounters with news media over the next few months for the novice interviewee – mainly through IDSA activities, when she attended rallies, anniversaries and memorial services. The only difficulties Jan said she encountered were with television reporters, whom she described as 'very, very hard' and 'very cruel, throwing microphones in your face'. IDSA holds a rally on April 28 each year for their National Day of Mourning. Five months after Anthony died, IDSA asked Jan to give a speech outlining what had happened to her family. She noticed 'a few people taking notes' and one TV reporter interviewed her after she spoke, writing down some of the things Jan said.

The group then marched to Parliament House and Jan was interviewed again on the front steps of the building. She was asked what she thought of then Premier Jeff Kennett:

I said, 'Well, here we are on the steps of Parliament, do you think he is going to come out here and talk to us? Do you think he is going to answer our questions?' And then I said, 'For all I care, Jeff Kennett can go and get stuffed.'

Her last succinct and colourful phrase was all that ran in the newspapers and on television news reports, which disappointed Jan:

Everywhere you go the (television reporters) are throwing microphones in your face, 'Tell us this, tell us that.' We went to the launch of the Labor Party's WorkCover policy and, again, they were throwing microphones in our faces ... they are like a pack of wolves, they all just hang around you waiting for the kill.

Jan said that people like her – inexperienced at handling journalists, still distressed and in mourning – feel ‘panic, sheer panic’ when a media pack descends upon them, especially if their words are selectively edited. However, while she felt she had not been portrayed fairly, she did not feel regret for her words which were taken out of context by news media on the steps of Victoria’s Parliament House: ‘If they had played the whole interview, even seven seconds of it, I mean (that) I said more than “Jeff Kennett can get stuffed” in that time.’

She agreed it would be easier in such circumstances if journalists approached individually rather than as a pack, ‘if they had something worthwhile to ask’:

If somebody came up to me and asked, ‘Do you mind if I ask you these questions?’ I would answer all of them, because that’s why I go to all these rallies, and that’s why I do all these talks. I don’t mind answering people’s questions, but not to have things thrown in your face and not even a second to think about it. It’s just, ‘Give me an answer’ and, if it is not the answer they want to hear, they will go and ask somebody else and just keep going until they do get the answer they want to hear.

Jan reserved her sharpest criticism for one former Channel Seven reporter, Nicole Cvastic, who regularly covered industrial relations and workplace news:

She is the worst, absolutely the worst. She was the rudest, pushiest, absolutely dreadful person ... she lacks basic human decency ... She is just one of these people, like I said, if she doesn’t get the answers she wants she will just keep pushing until she can get something ... ‘What do you think of this?’ ‘What do you think of that?’, you know? What am I supposed to think? I mean ... Anthony was killed in November and this was the following April, so it was just five months. I mean, what am I supposed to be thinking? I was still running on adrenalin.

Others in the Carrick family have also experienced the harsh realities of news coverage and have each responded differently:

My husband says nothing at all. I don’t even know if he read the stories in the paper or not. Alan and Jason looked at them but didn’t really say a lot, and my daughter cuts them all out and keeps them. On days like the National Day of Mourning and on the one where I made comments on the steps of Parliament House, she was with me. She came with me, so they have taken photos of us together and put her name and things in the paper. She was surprised because even I don’t know where they got her name from.

Her daughter did not recall the photograph being taken, Jan said, but while they were marching ‘they were taking photos left, right and centre’. That price is worth paying, Jan says, because coverage of rallies, ceremonies and protests sees important issues raised. Unlike road deaths, which receive heavy, sustained coverage, workplace deaths ‘don’t seem to mean anything’:

It is just a one-off thing that just happens. And it is only after all the recent coverage with IDSA, the unions and everything like that, where they are standing up and saying, 'We are not going to take it any more' that it is starting to get noticed. But some work accidents don't even make the paper. You would never know about them. Anthony's made the paper because it was his first day at work and because he was young. But, if you are a family man or something like that, they don't want to know. People don't want to know that another family has been left.

Jan acknowledges the news media 'are doing their job and everybody's got a job that nobody wants to do'. She also says that distress can equally be caused by non-news programs:

Once on *The Footy Show* [Nine Network] they sent up the WorkCover ad. They were in a football factory – and this upset me greatly – and a giant football came down and crushed the man underneath and they made some comment like, 'I didn't hear him scream', you know, like they had one of those WorkCover ads which also has a guy falling through a roof and he is on the ground, and I think the guy in the WorkCover ad says, 'I can still hear him screaming', and his mate says, 'We all can'. On this football program they did the same thing, they crushed this guy under a giant football and they are all standing around saying, 'I can still hear him scream.' Well that upset me greatly because he was crushed under something and, to me, it could have been Anthony under the wall for all I know.

Jan wrote to the Nine Network after the program was aired and the following week she and others received an on-air apology. 'They didn't realise that it would offend some people.' A few months later there was another television comedy program, hosted by Mick Molloy, which did another send-up of a WorkCover advertisement. Jan recalled it was the same sort of send up, of a man falling, but they had tagged it 'pants safety' where the man putting his pants on kept falling over and was injured. This mocked another Work Cover advertisement where a group of workers collect items out of a locker, put them in a bag and take them to the victim's wife. In this second send-up a photo out of his locker was featured with a photo of his jeans. Again, Jan said, the tag line was: 'I didn't hear him scream.' So Jan wrote again and, three weeks later, received a telephone call from the producer to apologise the day before the program was axed for good. As for the original series of WorkCover ads that are designed to shock workplaces into better safety habits, Jan says she 'absolutely hates' them and especially would not watch one if it contained a reconstruction of a crush fatality.

*Feedback for the media from the participant*

Jan says newsroom decisions makers need to ensure their staff treat people with more understanding and compassion: 'Not everything is sensationalism. Some people are greatly affected by things that happen in their life and it is not all competition ... put a little bit of thought into what you do and say.' Individual journalists, she says, need to get over the mistaken notion of 'nice people won't last':

I believe that, in the end, the nice people are the winners, because they will be the ones people will want to talk to. I would rather ring up Robyn [Riley] and say to her, well I have got their really great story for you, rather than talk to [the Channel Seven industrial rounds reporter], because Robyn was very decent to me.

It is interesting to note how Jan, a novice with no previous media experience, rapidly learned to deal with the reporter who treated her decently. She understood the mistakes Riley initially made were just that: mistakes. She chose to work again with Riley because she was 'human' – not perfect, but still a decent person. This is in stark contrast to the pushy Channel Seven reporter who Jan and her IDSA colleagues prefer not to work with if it can be avoided.

## 5.2 The experienced engine driver

This case study looks at the experiences of a woman who became a lobbyist after a string of workplace deaths, including her father's. This woman's proactive approach towards news media has been developed over time but is not without contradictions or occasional concerns. It has, however, brought positive results for both sides in the form of strong news stories that, in turn, have pushed legislative and other changes.

### *Background to the traumatic incident*

According to his daughter Liz, John Horvath was a cheerful, diligent and careful member of a road construction crew that was building the Burke Road extension to South-Eastern Arterial. Although his home was in Macedon, two and a half hours' drive north of Melbourne, with his wife Elizabeth, John was living in the city during the week and would be at work well before 7am to make sure that his machines were oiled and ready to operate.

On October 31, 1995, it was no different. He had been working for three months for the multinational construction company that was completing this high-profile project for VicRoads. When he had been asked to list a family contact, John had put down that of his adult daughter Liz Horvath Mobayad, then a science student, because she was the only family member living in Melbourne at the time.

The previous evening a new, 15.5-tonne compactor had been delivered to the site for John to use. It did not have any enclosed roll-over protection, a requirement of all VicRoads projects, nor any fire extinguisher. Some time around 9.30am, while John was driving this compactor near an unmarked and unfenced embankment, the earth gave way under the weight of the machine and the vehicle tipped over, bursting into flames. By the time his workmates got an extinguisher and were able to reach him, John was minutes from death because of his crush injuries.

While television news crews were able to cover and broadcast news of the incident within an hour or so, flying a helicopter in to take overhead footage of the scene, Liz said official word of John's death did not reach her, or her mother, for more than eight hours. Liz had been in a thermal processing class about the time her father was killed and then spent several hours at home before an evening maths class at a different campus. Liz recalled having an unsettled day, especially after seeing an 11am news bulletin that reported the construction site death:

... I more or less saw the entire image on the screen as though it was quite prolonged, although I know logically that it was news in brief. It was very, very quick but it seemed like it was there for quite a while, and that it was more or less this sort of muted whitish grey tones, it wasn't in colour. And I knew, really, deep down I knew even though they didn't say Dad's name, I knew, I just knew. I wasn't even quite sure that he would be on that particular construction site, but I think I just went into denial. I became very angry, I made a telephone call to his answering machine, semi-hysterical I suppose, saying, 'Call me up the minute you get home'. And I thought, 'God, when he does get home he is going to get it, I will stand over him and make him give that bloody job up'.

When it came time to leave for her evening class, Liz was even more anxious because her father had not returned her call, even though he would usually be home by 5pm. Around 8pm an administration staff member came to her classroom and asked for her by name. He escorted her to an office and said she should call her mother:

I thought, 'Oh shit.' but even then I hadn't really put two and two together. Maybe I did somewhere, way back in the back of the mind, but I was just thinking, 'What could justify being called in the middle of my maths class? This had better be important.' When I rang that's when Mum said, you know, Dad had been killed and I couldn't believe it, just couldn't believe it. I must have been crying immediately, because everything was sort of wet and all I wanted to do was get down to the Coroner's office immediately because I didn't believe it.

After confirming her father's identity to the Coroner, her family travelled to the morgue, joining Liz around midnight to pay their respects. With little or no sleep, early the next day Liz went to the police station nearest the scene of her father's death and was escorted to the site:

It would have helped (us cope) if we had been told immediately, because I would have like to have gone to that site while Dad was there, but they deliberately do this, they keep the families away for as long as possible. They don't want families crawling on the site while there is a body there and while the place might be crawling with journos. They don't want that, because the photo (opportunity) is just too good, too tempting ... I was there by the crack of dawn the next day. But, by then, they had already moved a lot of stuff. See, when something like this happens, the companies want to keep everything quiet, minimise the whole lot, minimise the damage.

### *Immediate media coverage*

Having been active in the union movement as whip for a public service union, Liz was used to frequent contact with the media on various issues. However, apart from the mid-morning television news item and a brief news item in the *Herald-Sun* the next day, there appeared to be little serious attention to her father's death:

There was nothing in *The Age*. I thought that was pretty pathetic. They weren't reporting such a terrible accident, a fatality at that ... I didn't see any of the evening (TV news reports) because I had been at class and then at the Coroner's. I did see it that week though, because my husband got in touch with Seven, Ten and Nine for me and asked for the (raw) footage ... and they were very kind, except for Channel Seven ... what they sent me wasn't worth bloody dubbing, honestly, it was pathetic. Channel 10 and Channel 9, though, were very good.

All stations provided tapes at no cost to the family, only requiring a request in writing. Liz, who wanted to use the raw, unedited footage to gain a better insight into what might have happened, was annoyed the Channel Seven tape had been edited. 'I hate that condescending shit, where somebody feels like they have the right to censor whatever before it reaches your eyes.'

### *Ongoing media coverage*

When her family collected John's things the day after his death and advised the real estate, they were surprised to find out they would have to continue paying rent on his behalf, indefinitely:

We were forced to pay the rent ... in lieu of notice. It was never the money but the principle that landlords could claim rent indefinitely, until they had secured a new tenant. We lodged proceedings with the Residential Tenants Tribunal only to be told by the Adjudicator that 'The law is an ass' and that the Act made no provision for the death of tenants. We approached the media and lobbied the Attorney-General's Department to have the Act changed. In July, 1998, the Act was amended so that landlords could not claim more than 28 days' rent when a tenant died. Dad would be very pleased that he was instrumental in rectifying such an unjust law.<sup>243</sup>

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Horvath Mobayad, L. (1999) *Till death do us part : Industrial death narratives (3rd edition)*. Melbourne: IDSA.. Pp6-7.

In the months after John's death, Liz' scientific mind also began to question the circumstances around her father's death and she decided to complete her own investigation. Over the next year she read, visited construction sites, talked to workers who used similar machines and examined the machines herself, piecing together what had happened:

I didn't want it second- or third-hand, I wanted to know first-hand: the toxicology reports, medical reports and then asking (for) so many opinions. I was crawling around every construction site I could get entry to, every compactor I saw on every site, I was in it, on it, under it, you know, showing them all sorts of pictures, watching them, how they operated, talking to them about the pros and cons of the various machines. I was a pain in the arse. (But) I realised that everything that I had been told and the way in which the investigation had been put together was just bullshit. I knew I had a huge fight on my hands but unless I was really, really lucky there was no way I was going to bring that company to justice because their resources were just unlimited.

Like Jan Carrick, Liz experienced difficulty getting action by WorkCover and the former company safety organisation that is now amalgamated with WorkCover:

(They were) rude, obnoxious bastards. (They) couldn't answer a simple question and no matter how politely you phrased it they would be hanging the phone up or saying, 'Well, you are not entitled to know any of this. It has nothing to do with you.' (She would counter) 'This is my flesh and blood that has been killed, not yours. I want to see these reports, I want to see those statements' and they would just hang up on you. I was a novice. This is not my area of expertise and I had to very quickly become an expert, I had to very quickly find out all the relevant legislation, regulation, guidelines and no-one was helping me so it was a lot of research, a lot of foot-slogging, it was a hell of a lot of reading and trying to understand what I was reading. Trying to apply it, even trying to play their game, you just don't win unless you have the same sort of resources, you just can't win. They have an answer for everything.

John's was the first of four road construction deaths in Victoria in a period of just 19 months, a fact that spurred an already angry Liz into action. She formed the group now known as Industrial Death Support and Advocacy (IDSA) and began lobbying the media:

... my immediate need was to find other people like us, because no-one could help us, no-one could tell us what we were in for, what the process was. I really focused on that for the next couple of months, trying to find others like us, which was very hard to do, especially when I saw there was a death in the paper, I would get in touch with that journalist to track that family and got co-operation. That was good. I suppose six months later was when I really started embarking on a media campaign.

Dozens of interviews about her father's death followed, Liz said, because 'I wanted them (the employer) to know that I wasn't going anywhere'. The other thing she wanted to do highlight the number of people killed in industrial deaths or who died from work-related causes in this country. 'When I found out what the stats were like ... it was just incredible, I couldn't believe it.' The workplace and work-related death toll, she noted, each year exceeded the national road toll. Yet, she noted, the amount of media coverage for such deaths is low and there are few co-ordinated awareness campaigns to improve workplace safety.

### *Positives of media coverage*

As time went on, Liz stopped talking about her father's death to the media and has taken up more general concerns and the causes of others who are mourning the loss of a loved one who died at work. Today, she shies away from becoming the focus of stories:

So many times I have said, 'I am not the story. Don't you listen to what I am saying? I am giving you everything, I am giving you the ammunition, I am giving you the angle, I am giving you whatever you want. Why are you so intent on taking pictures of me? I am not the one, I don't want people to focus in and look at my face. I don't want sympathy, what I am asking for is co-operation.'

Liz says she prefers to work with radio and print reporters and is self-deprecating about her TV appearances:

... I really don't like going onto the box. I don't mind for the rallies when they are focusing on a lot but, but I just don't like the television. There is not enough coverage to really get into the issues ... besides, I look like a water buffalo on TV. I hate it. Give me radio until the cows come home, but no bloody television and I don't mind the news either.

### *Negatives of media contact*

Not all of her experiences with the media as a lobbyist have been easy. In 1999, at the Longford Royal Commission which followed the fatal explosion at an Esso gas plant in Victoria, Liz experienced the frenzied attention of a hungry media pack when she was asked to leave the hearing room and said 'awful' episodes like this invaded a person's personal space:

I came out and it was like all these (microphones) really close to the tip of my nose ... All I wanted to do was just to compose myself for one minute in privacy, have a quick cigarette and then I would have spoken to them ... I finally said, 'Look, could you just please give me a minute?' But, when I went outside, they all followed me outside ... It was like, 'God Almighty, do I have to go to the loo to have a cigarette?' I mean they could see that I was upset, but that was what they wanted. They wanted somebody who sounded upset on the radio, or who would look like they were upset on the TV that night. I went ahead with the TV people and we did the press conference later that day on the proposal to introduce legislation for industrial manslaughter.

Again, like Jan Carrick, Liz was extremely wary of Channel Seven's industrial reporter whom, she said, deserved 'a boot up the bum'. But Liz's persistence with handling the media, even TV news teams, has paid dividends:

... we are starting to see some more coverage and ... we have a good relationship with a great many of the media ... We are pro-active in that respect, we will send out press releases, we will get on to the good ones and ask, 'Hey can you come down to court, such and such is happening...' We drum up a lot of the publicity if one of our members is having enormous problems and we have just come to the end and there is really no more negotiating to be done ... we will stage a media opportunity ... (and) with the good (reporters) we will co-operate. When there is a giant rally and they want one or two little personal stories to go into the big one, we will say, 'Okay'.

At the time of her father's death, Liz would have preferred to have had more media coverage about his accident. By the time she was interviewed for this research, she could understand her timing and approach had not been right. One concern Liz continues to have is with the use of a simplified, clichéd approach to journalism employed by magazine reporters who, she says, take 'liberties' with people's stories to make them fit the style and audience of their publications. This, she says, results in formulaic stories that do not properly describe the uniqueness of a family's experiences.

She also feels quite strongly about the sometimes sloppy standard of research and reporting by television journalists. Speaking of the press conference following the Longford Commission, she noted that reporters were asking a lot of questions that they should have already researched before coming out to cover the case:

They were asking, 'Where are those stats?' and saying, 'Supply us with a copy of (this that and the other)'. It wasn't statistical information that the Labor Party had produced, it was outside sources. 'Well, you lazy old bastards, get off your arses and go do your own research. You know, you want to sit there and be spoon-fed' ... it is not enough to come and just do that story, you want to make sure that it is right, that somebody is not feeding you garbage. I personally would cross check things to make sure I wasn't being led up the bloody garden path and that this information was fair dinkum.

Over time, she said, she had 'become wise' to different journalists and the way they worked when covering issues:

Well, there are certain journalists, personalities from the television mainly, that I wouldn't bother with because I know what the results are from them, but by the same token there are some that I would bend over backwards to accommodate because they are very, very good at what they do ... there are still some out there who, I think, are absolute bloody mongrel bastards and they have got no business being journalists, they, a lot of them, don't tackle news stories or items objectively and fairly.

Offence to victim's families can be caused by small things. What really annoyed Liz Mobayad in one Melbourne newspaper report was a throwaway line written as a caption under a photograph of her:

... it was a ... very unflattering photo ... I was lobbying madly to try and get those legislative changes made in the Coroner's Act and the caption said something like 'disgruntled family', I can't remember the rest of it but I thought, 'I am not disgruntled, there are fundamental flaws in this legislation that need to be addressed. It is not me spitting sour grapes or whatever else.'

When a photograph run on the front page of *The Age*, showed a worker, Justin O'Connor, trapped in a trench collapse as rescuers dug frantically but in vain to save him, Liz was blunt:

I did feel badly when I saw Justin O'Connor's picture ... (he was) submerged completely in the hole, with just this part of his face sticking out, gasping for his last breath. I thought, 'My God, if his family sees that, which they will see that, it is going to be a very, very hard image to forget or to even cope with.'

While this might seem at variance with her earlier criticism of the Seven Network's editing of raw footage taken of her own father's death scene, Liz made the point that viewing such graphic images should be optional for families and not widely published without their input. Another instance Liz recalled was the death of two policemen who had been gunned down in the street, with 'massive pools of cherry red blood' visible in news photographs. She said she thought the image might have been digitally manipulated because it was so intense. 'Those two images were in the worst possible taste. They crossed the line.'

*Feedback for the media from the participant*

Once again, Liz' feedback reflects the nature of her previous experiences with the media. As a union whip experienced in dealing with the media, Liz seems to understand the power structures in newsrooms and the role of journalists to report rather than make the news. Knowing this, Liz says newsroom managers should resist sending out staff with a pre-conceived notion of what angle of their story will take. She also suggests that when covering traumatic incidents, they only send staff who are experienced and sensitive to those interviewees who might be fragile or traumatised. Once an undertaking is made to run a story, Liz adds, then do so:

Don't cut it at the last God-damned second, if you have to reshuffle it somewhere else ... well you can understand that. But with many people who are desperate to put the spotlight on an issue, it is so devastating when (they) pour (their) heart out to a journalist and ... then it never runs and (they) have to chase them up saying, 'Well what's happening here? Are you going to run it, not going to run it?'

When handling interviews after traumatic incidents, Liz said individual journalists needed to remember they were 'reporting the news not making the news'. Interviewees should not be 'bullied' in certain directions or to give particular responses, she said, nor have words put in their mouths because it suits what a journalist is looking for. She said crying, distressed interviewees would often not register exactly what was transpiring. Journalists, she added, should not exploit such situations by distorting their comments. Liz also said reporters, especially those working in television news and current affairs, should not provoke interviewees to cry when they notice an interviewee is beginning to 'break down':

...there are certain questions that will have that affect and unfortunately there are some journalists who are very, very aware that certain questions have a certain effect and that is exactly what they are looking for ... they will bombard people with that line of questioning because what they are looking for is tears, and the minute the tears start the cameras are on them. It is not decent.

Her final piece of advice was for the families of victims if they take a public stance on an issue:

When we march we know we are in the front line and ... we are fair game, but I tell them, 'If you don't want them focusing in, and you don't want your face on the front page of the *Herald-Sun* the next day, you put your (dark) glasses on.'

### 5.3 The granite worker

This case study examines the experiences of the widow of John Papa. Papa lived in a blended family with Mary Bantos. They had a young son Nicholas, aged three. Mary's older children Stefanie, 12, and Peter, 10, completed their new family. From day one, Mary recalled, John supported her children and brought happiness into their lives. He loved to cook and take the family to BBQs or yabbing.

#### *Background to the traumatic incident*

Papa had been working for two years for a granite factory in Melbourne's suburban Thomastown when, on the morning of Thursday, August 8, 1997, he had a load to deliver near where they lived. John and a workmate called in at home where Mary was doing a few chores before leaving for work at a childcare centre. The men had coffee, bade farewell and left. At 1.15pm, John was back at the factory, unloading a shipping container, when a 2.5-tonne block of granite that was leaning up against the wall of the container fell on him, with his chest taking the full weight of the impact. According to Mary, John's usual job was working at a machine that rounded off the edges of granite benches and he had not received any training about unloading procedures.

Because it had been a pupil-free day at Stefanie's school, Mary had taken her daughter to work with her and Nicholas was there also. After 4pm, one of John's older sisters called Mary at work. Like Liz Horvath Mobayad, John's family had heard a radio report about an accident at a granite factory at Thomastown in which someone had been killed. Not wanting to worry Mary, John's sister simply asked for their home telephone number and whether John would have been home.

Unaware of any concern, Mary asked the sister to relay a message to John to collect Nicholas from her work and Peter from Mary's mother because she and Stefanie would be at work until 6pm. When there was no answer at their home, the family called Thomastown police. They were told police needed to speak to Mary. Worried by this, John's family called the childcare centre and advised Mary's co-ordinator something was wrong.

Mary had been reading a story to a group of children just before 5pm when the centre co-ordinator interrupted to relay the message that Mary needed to call John's work as there had been a problem and the police wanted to talk to her. Still oblivious to news of the accident, Mary knew John didn't see eye to eye with his foreman and they had been bickering of late. Her initial thought was that perhaps they had come to blows and that John had 'got himself locked up or something'. She was unprepared for what was coming:

I rang up John's work, spoke to the receptionist and told her I was John's wife and that I wanted to speak to John. She put me through to the accountant, whom I had never spoken to before, (who) said: 'Mary, there's been an accident.' I asked where John was, which hospital, because I just wanted to get to him. She said again, 'There's been an accident.' I said, 'Just tell me where he is'. She then said to me, 'I'm sorry, it was fatal.' I couldn't believe it. I remember screaming, 'No' and falling to the floor.<sup>244</sup>

Stefanie and Nicholas rushed to their mother's side and, shortly after, the police arrived to confirm the fact John was dead.

Prior to his death, John had raised concerns about a number of occupational health and safety issues, including factory procedures and had been instrumental in trying to organise union membership for the workers. In January 1999, the company was fined \$22,000 for 'failure to provide a safe workplace'.<sup>245</sup> It was during the preparation for that case that the power of video images was driven home for Mary. Having initially missed television news reports of John's accident, Mary later sought video copies of those reports from her solicitor to review what had been aired. The tapes were batched up and sent to Mary's home. Somehow, the solicitor's office had included a videotape of the Coroner's footage of John's death scene among the television reports. Mary was unaware of this and, when she sat down to view the tapes, was deeply shocked to suddenly see where and how John had died. She said those images have haunted her ever since and contributed to the vivid flashbacks she still suffered, two years after John's death.

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<sup>244</sup> Op. cit., P13.

<sup>245</sup> Op. cit., Pp14 and 17.

### *Immediate media coverage*

Apart from the initial television reports and a small report in *The Age* – all collated from police reports of the incident – Mary heard nothing from the media immediately after John's death:

I think it was only after John died ... that they started taking interest in industrial deaths and with WorkCover reforms. I was briefly questioned at one of the rallies, because I was marching, so I suppose that made it interesting, a widow. I didn't want to say much at the time, I was really kind of scared.

Mary said, at first, she did not know what to say nor what she was allowed to say. But she overcame her fears, participated in more IDSA rallies and even began doing interviews with newspaper reporters.

### *Ongoing media coverage*

In total, Mary estimated, she had given about a dozen interviews with the media in the two years since John's death. Most of these were conducted in her own home, with the exception of an interview with Kerry-Anne Kennerley on the (now defunct) *Midday* program on the national Nine Network. This, she said, was 'very helpful in bringing people out' by drawing a lot of attention and, as a consequence, action.

### *Positives of media coverage*

Mary has mostly appreciated the media coverage she has achieved 'because it has put the issue (of dangers in the workplace) in the spotlight and that is what I wanted because I think it is a way of achieving changes'. The media, she said, grew more sympathetic over time towards her because they recognised her role change:

I think it is because I am raising the issue and (the journalists) are also aware of IDSA (and) what we are about ... I feel now as if they treat me as someone who is going to be around, and I am one of many, whereas before, it struck me, I felt as if I was a 'one-off'.

*Negatives of media coverage*

During the earlier news reports, Mary was surprised and annoyed at the tone of her portrayal and with the images taken and published. These, she said, portrayed her as weak and vulnerable. Her children had been embarrassed by the media coverage at times and, looking back, she would have preferred some earlier photographs had not been published. Sometimes, she says, she looks at the newspaper clippings and thinks, 'Was that me?' While she was coerced into one early photograph, she says, there were also some underlying pressures that contributed to her decision to co-operate with the media. She said she was broke and desperate for publicity that might hurry her insurance case along, 'so I needed the media as well'.

Mary found herself reacting to stories run by the media. She said inaccuracies in one magazine story, in *That's Life*, disturbed her and her family. A television news follow-up of the incident that showed the company and the container – even though John's body had been removed – 'wasn't really helpful'. 'It was damning the company, which was satisfying for me, even though it was painful to watch. (John's employers) weren't getting away with it. It was bad publicity for them.'

Some journalists, Mary noted, were very good to work with and made her feel 'comfortable' because they (a) treated her as a person who had 'something fair to say', (b) were sympathetic to her cause and (c) reported accurately. Others, however – like Nicole Chvastic, the Seven Network industrial reporter mentioned by other IDSA members – were abrupt and lacked 'good people skills'. What frightened Mary, though, was the media 'pack' that descended upon her at her first public occasion. She said as many as 10 media outlets were there, including Melbourne's major newspapers and all of the city's TV stations. It was the launch of the new WorkCover Act and she had been asked by the agency to help promote workplace safety. Having taken her children along, Mary spoke about John's death and how it had affected her family. The media, through WorkCover's media officer, asked to put more questions to Mary, then still a novice interviewee. 'I didn't know what they were going to ask me. I always thought that they would ask you beforehand and, as you answered, they would tape. I didn't realise that they were just going to ask me while they were filming ...I felt like a frightened rabbit.'

There have been other times when Mary found the media had been intrusive, especially newspaper reporters. One was intent on investigating the compensation side of her situation and repeatedly asked for details. A report ran on a speculated payout she would receive, but the payout figure had been misconstrued:

I didn't mind the reporter, I think I was more annoyed at my solicitor rather than the reporter. At that stage no compensation figure had been set ... but (her solicitor) told the reporter a ballpark figure would be 'X' and she reported that. It wasn't a ballpark figure at all. (The solicitor had) actually stated the maximum that I could have got, including interest, and that was nothing like what I did get. So it just made her sound good – that she was here for someone and she was going to get me so much money ... basically advertising herself.

Mary says she now realises 'how the media can make you look so bad' or 'can make you look weaker than you are or stronger than you are'. She has concluded that 'you are at their mercy'.

However, Mary had never contemplated laying a complain against a journalist:

I don't think back then if anything had of upset me I would have been disappointed, because I didn't have the strength to complain. I think I was of the frame of mind that I was being hurt by so many, in so many different fields, that it was something else I had to carry and deal with, whereas now, in a sense, I am kind of stronger in some areas ...

#### *Feedback for the media from the participant*

Feedback from Mary, too, reflects the nature of her experience with the media. It is easy to see how her feedback shows a desire to protect others from undergoing the shock she suffered when she viewed Coronial material on videotape that was inadvertently sent to her amid copies of media stories about her partner's death. It also reflects her own experiences as a novice when dealing with the media, how she learned the hard way about how 'harsh' journalists can be as well as her desire to ensure other novices are given a fair go. Mary said newsroom managers needed to think of families and be careful of what they subjected them to 'because if they were to hear (or see) some things that they are not prepared for it can affect them for the rest of their lives'. She encouraged individual journalists to be accurate and not behave like a 'snake in the grass':

... don't be sneaky in the sense of looking for angles and getting things out of people that could turn on them, because it is something that they would have to carry and it could scar them ... it also helps to build distrust in the media and in general. Families that have been traumatised need to be able to know that somewhere along the line they can ... build up trust. You lose trust, and sometimes people are that vulnerable that it doesn't take much to break (them) and it could be a media report that is the last straw.

## 5.4 The supervisor

Crisis coverage demands pictures. Arresting images may not prevent compassion fatigue – they may in fact promote it by causing viewers to turn away from the trauma – but no pictures for a crisis is even worse. If a story doesn't have a visual hook, an audience will often ignore it. Better to have their interest for a time, than not to have their interest at all.<sup>246</sup>

This section examines the experiences of the May family, whose eldest son Gary died three weeks after a horrific industrial explosion that occurred at Sims Metal in the inner-western Melbourne industrial suburb of Brooklyn on September 30, 1986 at 9am. That blast ended up injuring seven people and eventually claiming the lives of four people over the coming weeks. The media coverage involved a particularly controversial image of workers taken moments after the blast.

### *Background to the traumatic incident*

At 21, Gary May was already a supervisor with the prominent metalworks where he had started his working life as a cadet. Gary's mother, Deanne May, then real estate property manager (now semi-retired) was at work the day of the explosion. Her middle son Reece was home from work with some young friends when they got a call saying Gary had been taken to hospital hurt. The group of young people collected Deanne from her work and took her to the Royal Melbourne Hospital while her colleagues located her husband, Jack, who had been competing in a golf tournament.

The family was shocked when they saw Gary brought in on a trolley, encased in foil, but they believed that, because he had spoken to them – telling them he had been in an explosion but not to worry about him – that he would recover. Only when a nurse brought Gary's watchband in to his parents and said 'I want you to have this' did Deanne begin to realise the gravity of his injuries:

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<sup>246</sup> Moeller (1999), P37.

That just threw me of course then it hits you and you think, 'This is a little bit more serious than what I am wanting to acknowledge'. You know it is but you try (to think otherwise). Our friends were just wonderful. A couple of them heard about the blast at Sims Metal on the radio and figured it out that Gary was involved because they hadn't released names at that stage as they hadn't been able to contact my mother-in-law and all my family – which was good, that was good of the media. They didn't release any names until they knew every family member had been notified.

As word of the death of Gary's foreman reached the family, Gary was wheeled into the intensive care ward. Over the coming days the May family settled into the hospital routine, somewhat shielded from the media by hospital staff who issued condition updates on behalf of all those affected, but exposed to the fact that two other workmates succumbed to their injuries while Gary remained gravely ill. After three weeks, Gary lost his battle and his family went home and prepared for their eldest son's funeral.

Deanne pointed out that the families affected by the explosion responded in different ways in the months and years afterwards. Some were so shattered by what happened, family breakdowns followed. Others, like themselves, were able to see that individuals within the family were dealing with their trauma on their own terms. But that, she noted, would not be obvious to people outside their family unit. For the first four years, for example, Deanne visited her son's grave every Sunday and 'every other anniversary day'. Her husband, she said, could not go. Her cousin, a clergyman, reassured her that such a difference was not unusual.

#### *Immediate media coverage*

On the day of the explosion, largely because of the time it occurred, there was intense and detailed media coverage. This was followed by daily updates on the conditions of those injured. Hurst and White (1994) picked up on Gary May's plight when they described a picture of him, naked and burned, alongside another burned colleague that was run in *The Age* the day after the explosion.

The picture was taken by an industrial photographer, Carmine Cozzolino, an eyewitness of the accident, who gave a copy to *The Age* in Melbourne. It showed one of the victims with his back to the camera but the other was completely naked, his clothes have been stripped off in the blast. One member of *The Age* staff argued that the picture should be used as it was, but a more senior executive suggested that the man's genitalia should be painted out as a matter of decency, and his view prevailed. The picture was altered, though the man could still be identified, and displayed across eight columns of *The Age*'s front page. On the same day the picture was also published in *The Canberra Times*, then in the same newspaper group, John Fairfax, as *The Age*. *The Canberra Times* gave it less space than *The Age*, spreading it across three columns, but left in the genitalia.<sup>247</sup>

Hurst and White (1994) noted that readers of *The Age* 'reacted in outrage at the photograph, protesting that the injured men deserved compassion, not the degradation of being shown naked in their pain'. However, the decision to publish was defended by Professor J. Masterton, Associate Professor of Surgery at Monash Medical School. In a letter to the paper he pointed out that the photographer had not gained financially – he had donated the money paid for the picture to a fund for the accident victims – and had been devastated by criticisms levelled at him.

This is not an attempt to expose people cruelly at their most vulnerable moment. It gives us a lesson and hopefully a telling lesson of the horror of what, after all, was a limited explosion. The onlookers and the victims are standing in shock. The victims are terribly burned. This is no different than what we see coming almost daily from South Africa and the Lebanon. It also shows in miniature what would happen to thousands of people in the event of a nuclear attack or even another Chernobyl. The message should be noted by all.<sup>248</sup>

### *Positives of media coverage*

After that, Deanne said, the media were mostly really good to her family. Another local paper ran a tribute to Gary after getting many calls about him and Nine Network's *Nightline* forwarded a tape of a story they had run on industrial deaths. 'Basically we were just interested to find out what was happening and we have still got that tape, I don't think we have looked at it again since though.'

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247 Hurst & White (1994), P119.

248 Loc. cit.

### *Negatives of media coverage*

The reality was, however, that the media really maintained interest only up until the inquest. Deanne said she felt ‘very disappointed’ that the media did not pursue safety issues. The Mays, who cherish their privacy, felt ‘invaded’ to some degree by television news coverage and, Deanne said, the distress that caused led the family to decline several interviews.

By far the most distressing experience, Deanne said, was when her family was rocked by *The Age’s* publication of the photograph of Gary:

I was horrified ... *The Age* put it on their front page and I believe it was our son. It shows the building, the explosion, but it was rather horrific. I have only got a very quick vision of it because someone said it was Gary and I just, immediately, couldn’t even look at it. I haven’t really to this day looked at much of the media. If I went through (the clippings) I would probably be absolutely amazed at how much is there. Jack [her husband] said it is really quite a lot. But the actual photograph ... we believe should never have been shown to the public, because of the explosion, the heat, all Gary had was his work boots on at the accident and they showed this large picture on the front page. He had his back partly turned ...

I just thought that they had no right to show something so personal and so horrific to the public ... and a lot of those men who had seen the explosion, and then to see the picture again. I just felt that it should not have been shown. I think it must have been just a horrific feeling of helplessness for (the friends and families of those in the photograph). Gary was just standing there, they were all dazed ... I think they were really dramatising, they were trying to get the story, the top story, or whatever, and I just don’t think that there is need for that because it was horrific enough as it was with so many injured.

Being such a devastating explosion, it was news in itself ... I realised that there was certainly a story, and in their way too they were there to try to help prevent it ever happening again too, and we appreciate that.

While Deanne recalled that, generally, the media had been respectful, on the day of Gary’s funeral a photographer from a local paper ignored the family’s request for no media at the funeral. What further annoyed the family was the incorrect caption that ran with the unwanted photograph when it was published the following week:

... (the journalist) was trying to get a story and my husband was angry at the time because it was the next week and, as far as he was concerned, it wasn’t news and he wrote a letter to the editor just stating as such, that he thought it was pretty rude of them ...

*Feedback for the media from the participant*

Like her three IDSA colleagues, Deanne's feedback reflects her level of experience with news media prior to the explosion that eventually claimed the life of her son. However, with some 13 years elapsed between that time and her interview for this research, Deanne has reflected on the implications of media actions and other issues in a much broader way. This makes her observations even more considered and, hence, valuable for media personnel to consider.

Deanne said she felt newsroom managers needed to pay more attention to industrial deaths and to highlight more safety issues for workers. Individual journalists, she added, also needed to be aware of what families were going through as well as the reasons these sorts of incidents happen:

You go to work, you are doing your job and you expect to be home that evening, and I think it is pretty devastating when the family is rung with a phone call to say they are not coming home, or whatever ... Many young people would not even understand that this range of things can happen to people ... like it wouldn't have been any good me speaking to the media because I definitely would have said the wrong things, because I would have said it out of real anger.

Yet, Deanne May admitted, she realised the media was 'only doing its job' in covering the explosion and she acknowledged that she would not have made such an even-handed assessment in the year or so after her son's death.