

Investigations

'Beverly Hills 90210'

Complaint

The ABA investigation arose from an unresolved complaint by the Australian Medical Association (AMA). The AMA was concerned about the depiction of a murder/suicide attempt in an episode screened on 10 December 1996.

Relevant codes

The ABA considers the episode of the program which screened at 7.30 p.m. did not meet criteria for a program classified 'PG'.

The complaint was assessed against the following sections of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice

Section 2.12 of the code relates to material classified 'PG'. Specifically, section 2.12.5 of the code relates to the suicide or attempted suicide in 'PG' classified programs and provides:

The depiction of suicide or attempted suicide must be inexplicit and discreet, and must not be presented as the means of achieving a desired result or as an appropriate response to stress, depression or other problems.

Decision

The ABA found the broadcast by the Ten network of an episode of the program 'Beverly Hills 90210' breached the commercial television industry code of practice.

The episode of 'Beverly Hills 90210', which aired nationally on 10 December 1996, was titled 'The Big Hurt'. Within the episode were four separate storylines; the segment relating to the attempted murder/suicide was one of these stories.

The main characters in this story are 'Kelly', a regular character on the show and established as a role model, and 'Tara', introduced to the show in a previous episode but not a regular character. Through various incidents which take place in the lead-up scenes to the murder/suicide attempt, Tara is depicted as being unbalanced. The viewer is given the clear impression that her behaviour will result in some form of tragic outcome: the culmination of the drama is the murder/suicide attempt.

When Tara is confronted by Kelly about moving out of the beach house

they share, Tara threatens to kill herself or Kelly with a gun. She then forces Kelly from the house and into a car and tells her to drive around until ordered otherwise. When they eventually pull the car over, Kelly attempts to leave the car but is rendered unconscious by a blow to the head from the gun. Kelly is then bound to the steering wheel and is unable to escape, clearly not a willing participant in what has now become a murder/suicide attempt by Tara.

The ABA is of the opinion that visually the scenes depicted were not explicit. While the audience is shown briefly that the car has been set up to cause carbon monoxide to enter, they are not shown in any detail the practicalities involved. The audience is given a brief glimpse of the car's exterior showing the piping running from the exhaust into the car and, in a background shot, a brief view of towels wedged between the windows and roof of the car.

The ABA is of the opinion that dialogue accompanying these scenes could not be described as inexplicit or discreet. The ABA is concerned that the dialogue may have given enough information to a young person considering suicide to convince them of the apparent ease and success of this method of suicide.

The ABA found that while the visual scenes depicted were not explicit, the dialogue accompanying these scenes could not be described as inexplicit or discreet. The ABA therefore concluded that this episode of 'Beverly Hills 90210' was in breach of the PG code on the depiction of suicide (section 2.12.5).

Action taken

The Ten network has advised the ABA it has taken steps to avoid a further breach. In addition, there will be discussions between all networks, Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, the AMA, the ABA, and organisations who deal in suicide prevention, to discuss strategies in presenting this form of material. 

The codes

Commercial television, commercial and community radio, the ABC and SBS all operate under codes of practice, while other broadcasting sectors are well advanced in the development of their respective codes. The ABA supervises the operation of the codes and performs an independent adjudicator role where complaints are not resolved between the complainant and the broadcaster concerned.

Primary responsibility for compliance with the codes and for resolving complaints rests with the broadcasters. If a station fails to answer a complaint within 60 days, or if the response is unsatisfactory, then the complaint can be referred to the ABA for investigation.

Investigations

The ABA is required to investigate unresolved complaints and to inform complainants of the results of such investigations.

The ABA can also investigate complaints about the national broadcasters, the ABC and SBS.

The ABA also investigates complaints about matters relating to the standards for children's television or Australian content on television, the standards for subscription broadcasting, subscription narrowcasting and open narrowcasting, and complaints in relation to any type of broadcasting service where the complaint relates to a possible breach of the Act or conditions of licence.

The ABA has a range of sanctions available to it in the event of a breach of a code of practice, program standard or licence condition. Any action taken depends on the seriousness of the breach.