



INDEPENDENT MEDIA COUNCIL

DETERMINATION

Michael Hope v Seven West Media.

Seven West Media (SWM) publishes 'The PerthNow' newspaper which is circulated to various Perth suburbs. In recent issues of the paper its 'opinion' or 'lifestyle' section has featured a column titled "Sexploration" which addresses sexual issues in a semi-advisory way. This column appears on a page with the overall heading of "Parental Guidance".

Michael Hope objects to the column on the basis that it *'will have a very real and detrimental influence in the minds of young readers'*, and that even though headed "Parental Guidance" *'this doesn't preclude the fact that many children will read the article and be influenced by it to some degree.'* He more generally complains that if such a column becomes a norm for future media conduct, there will be little hope of *'holding fast to the Christian principles, values and morals, our country was founded on.'*

In response SWM asserts that long-held morals and values can and do change over time, and that "Sexploration" is no more explicit than similar advice columns to be found in other mainstream magazines and websites. SWM also makes the point that it is entitled to publish opinions on such issues, and that the views expressed are genuinely held beliefs of the writer. A major aim of the column is to de-stigmatise the issues it discusses.

The fundamental underlying principle of the IMC's Code of Conduct is freedom of speech, which means that the media are free to publish their own opinions as well as the opinions of others on matters of public interest. Sexual issues have always attracted public interest, and even more so now at a time when there have been significant changes in community attitudes as well as a greater willingness to openly discuss such matters. Even if it wished to, the IMC



is not in the position to censor free speech or to be an arbiter of public moral values. SWM is free to publish opinions about the matters dealt with by the column in question, and their publication is not a breach of the Code.

We nevertheless understand Mr Hope's concerns, based as they are on a belief in traditional moral values. There was once a time when the great majority of the public agreed that it was in the best interests of children for them to have limited knowledge about sexual matters. While some people still hold to that view, the flood of revelations about historical child sexual abuse has shown that sexually ignorant children are more vulnerable to exploitation. This along with the greater openness in society about sexual matters has led to many (if not most) parents deciding that they can best protect their children by ensuring that they receive an early and age-appropriate sexual education.

In this context SWM has acted responsibly in placing the 'Sexploration' column on a page headed "Parental Guidance". In the end it is the parents who must guide their children towards healthy attitudes about sex, and some (particularly those with teenage children) will see the column as an opportunity to have serious discussions about sexual responsibilities and relationships.

For these reasons we do not uphold the complaint.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "P Blaxell".

Peter Blaxell
Chairman
**Independent Media
Council**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim McGinty".

Jim McGinty
Member
**Independent Media
Council**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cheryl Edwardes".

Cheryl Edwardes
Member
**Independent Media
Council**