

Wednesday 19
February 2020

Dear [REDACTED],

Re: review of the Australian classification regulation

Please find below our submission.

Regards,

Elena Terol

Senior Project Officer – Suicide Prevention

Everymind

Background

Mindframe supports safe media reporting, portrayal and communication about suicide, mental ill-health, alcohol and other drugs.

As part of this work, *Mindframe* supports stage and screen professionals to continue to include fresh and original portrayals of suicide and mental ill-health that are accurate and authentic.

Mindframe is managed by [Everymind](#), a leading national Institute dedicated to reducing mental ill-health, reducing suicide and improving wellbeing for all Australians.

Everymind has been delivering world-leading, evidence-based prevention programs for more than 25 years.

[SANE Australia](#) is a national mental health charity working to make a real difference in the lives of people affected by complex mental health issues. The Dax Centre and the Anne Deveson Research Centre also form part of the SANE Australia group.

SANE's vision is for an Australia where people affected by complex mental health issues live long and fulfilling lives, free from stigma and discrimination. This includes adults aged 18 and over living in Australia who identify as having a complex mental illness, an experience of complex trauma or very high levels of psychological distress. For every person affected by mental health issues, there is a network of additional people impacted, including carers, family, friends and colleagues who often play a critical role in supporting their recovery.

SANE's work includes promoting mental health literacy, destigmatising poorly understood mental health issues, online peer support and information, specialist helpline support, research and advocacy.

In collaboration with the Australian Writers' Guild, *Mindframe* has developed guidelines for the portrayal of mental illness and suicide on stage and screen. The guidelines can be found [HERE](#).

Some of the key pieces of advice in these guidelines are included below.

Key issues to consider when portraying suicidal behaviour:

- Why am I introducing suicide into the story?
- Should the suicide be portrayed?
- How can I explore the issue with more depth? (effect on those left behind, different reactions between cultures/settings, contributing factors...)
- Have I checked the accuracy and authenticity of my portrayal?
- What else can I do? i.e. help-seeking information.

Key issues to consider when portraying mental illness:

- Will my portrayal be original?
- Am I perpetuating stereotypes?
- Will my portrayal of mental illness be truthful?
- What language will my characters use?
- Can I improve the accuracy and authenticity of my portrayal?
- Can the storyline have a positive effect on the audience?

Mindframe provides training for professionals and students in the stage and screen sector. We also provide advice on projects that are at various stages of development.

We work closely with a range of stakeholders, such as the following:

- Australian Writers' Guild
- Primary Health Networks and mental health organisations
- Department of Communications and the Arts (classification branch)
- Screen Producers Australia
- Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia
- Streaming services
- Broadcasters
- Audiences

We also work closely with SANE Australia, to promote safe, sensitive and responsible communication about suicide and mental illness by the media via the StigmaWatch program. This collaboration is key to ensure those with lived experience of mental illness or suicidality are represented respectfully and in a way educates the public and does not perpetuate stigma. This is a core feature of SANE's Peer Ambassadors program whereby people with a lived experience of complex mental health issues are trained and supported to share their story in a safe manner to increase public awareness and education.

Through this collaboration we have engaged with many theatre companies, TV and film producers, screen writers and directors and have influenced their work in an effort to reduce the stigma of mental illness and reduce suicidality.

Content warnings

It has also been through this work mainly that we have received several calls and emails from members of the public who felt distressed after watching content related to suicide for which they were not warned.

"Hello, I would like to report an item that has caused me severe distress. I watched the movie X. The warning message pointed out "strong adult themes and coarse language", genre "crime, drama, thriller". I have generally no issues watching any of this, but the movie contains graphic scenes of a suicide attempt and the character eventually ends her life as a suicide bomber. In the context of suicide prevention in my opinion the movie should be removed or at least have a clear warning about 'graphic scenes of a suicide attempt'. As a suicide attempt survivor I found this movie extremely triggering, but continued watching after the first suicide attempt as I did not expect another. I would appreciate if you could provide feedback and a possible solution to me." (Member of the public.)

Research shows that the way suicide and mental illness are portrayed on stage and screen can impact negatively on vulnerable audiences.

Evidence also shows that detailed portrayals of method or location are associated with suicide contagion.

In addition to advising content developers on the safest ways to portray mental illness and suicidal behaviour, we recommend that help-seeking information is provided for viewers, so that anyone distressed by the content knows how to reach for help.

We've also been advocating for the industry to include content warnings at the beginning of shows/films that specify that suicide or mental illness are portrayed in the piece, so that audiences can choose whether to watch their content.

Submission

It is within this context that we are making this submission for the consultation on the Guidelines for the Classification of Films and the Guidelines for the Classification of Computer Games.

We acknowledge that the theme of suicide and intentional self-harm can be portrayed in different ways and that context is crucial for determining impact. As already established in the Guidelines, impact may be higher where a scene contains greater detail, uses accentuation techniques or is prolonged.

Suicide and intentional self-harm are distinct enough from the other classifiable elements and have a significant and specific impact on vulnerable audiences. This may include increased risk of suicide contagion or causing distress to those who have a lived experience of suicidal behaviour or are bereaved by suicide.

Given the evidence regarding the impact that portrayals of suicide and intentional self-harm on stage and screen and via other media, *Mindframe* and SANE would like to advocate the following:

- That suicide and intentional self-harm be added to the list of classifiable elements in a film (violence, sex, language, drug use and nudity)
- That suicide and intentional self-harm be added to the list of classifiable elements in computer games
- That in relation to interactivity of computer games, suicide and intentional self-harm is added to the list of materials that must not be related to incentives or rewards
- That help-seeking information is required to be made available to viewers.