

24.01.16.

3.5 Deputy R.J. Ward of the Minister for Justice and Home Affairs regarding the recording of a death by suicide (OQ.6/2024)

Is it the Minister's assessment that the recording of death by suicide is adequately and accurately undertaken by the appropriate authorities involved; and if not, why not?

Deputy H. Miles of St. Brelade (The Minister for Home Affairs):

The decision as to whether a death is recorded as a suicide is made by the viscount as coroner, or the deputy viscount or relief coroner, following an inquest hearing at which evidence is heard and a finding of inquest made, all in accordance with the Inquests and Post-Mortem Examinations (Jersey) Law 1995. Essentially there are 2 elements which must be proved on the balance of probabilities: (1) that the deceased took their own life, and (2) that they intended to do so. Suicide is never presumed. Findings of inquest in Jersey and narrative conclusions, rather than the short-form conclusions used in England and Wales, such as suicide, accident, unlawful killing and open verdict, alcohol/drug-related, et cetera. The superintendent registrar uses the information provided in the finding of inquest, known as the particulars in the law, to populate the required fields in the death register. The superintendent registrar is required to register the death using all the information provided by the Viscount's Department in the finding of inquest. This process and death certification are requirements in law under the Marriage and Civil Status (Jersey) Law and the laws that govern the statutory function of the viscount. I have no reason to consider that it is not sufficiently robust.

3.5.1 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I thank the Minister for her answer because I know it is a complex subject, which is why I asked the question. May I ask the Minister whether, given that there are - and the word has gone out of my head now - processes to try and lower suicide, is the data accurate enough to get a real idea of the extent of suicide - demographics, et cetera - so that any plan can be targeted effectively on the Island. That is what I am trying to get out.

Deputy H. Miles:

I thank the Deputy for his follow-up question and I think this answer will help. Information relating to all deaths in Jersey is gathered by the Public Health Intelligence Unit and an annual report presented. In particular, the Jersey Mortality Report 2022 at page 16, where a wider definition of suicide is used.

[10:15]

That states: "Deaths are included here where the cause of death was recorded as intentional self-harm or undetermined intent." I think I am happy that the Public Health Department are taking accurate and reasonable steps to understand the extent of suicide and obviously use that information to inform their public health campaigns.

3.5.2 Deputy B.B. de S.DV.M. Porée of St. Helier South:

Can the Minister please explain how the death of those who do not live permanently in the Island, such as migrant workers and work permit people, is logged, if different at all?

Deputy H. Miles:

While I am not responsible for the Viscount's Department, I understand that it is irrelevant as to the nationality or the status of the person that resides in the Island. The death will be recorded in exactly the same way.

3.5.3 Deputy B.B. de S.DV.M. Porée:

My understanding is that work permit workers are the most vulnerable group in our Island at the moment and understanding those issues, the death, especially when it comes to suicide, it would really help because we could improve our work permit policy and understand how to look after migrant workers.

Deputy H. Miles:

I thank the Deputy for her question, but I understand the issues regarding the initial question from Deputy Ward and that of Deputy Porée to be entirely separate. The question was really directed at how the act of suicide is recorded in the Island. Certainly I have made my thoughts known regarding the special care of permit workers in a different forum.

3.5.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

I think the Minister answered partly a question I would have asked. So I think the follow up is to do with the fact that, say, an F.O.I. (freedom of information) request is put in asking about the rates of suicide in the Island, which figures will the questioner be given, given the fact that there seem to be a conservative estimate, which perhaps has a high bar for the definition of suicide, and the other definition which the Health Department may use for its stats purposes?

Deputy H. Miles:

I thank the Deputy for his question. When it comes to freedom of information, I think the obligation is for the appropriate agencies to provide all the information. I think it is likely that both sets of figures would be presented in that question.

3.5.5 Deputy R.J. Ward:

I am sure the Minister is sensitive to this issue, as the rest of us are. Can I ask the Minister, would she perhaps agree that there may be a difference in the public and private expression of the numbers of suicide, because families and cultures may want to not have that in the public domain, but that data is essential for us to make public health decisions? Is the Minister aware that that dichotomy between those 2 is a challenge, but it is something that will be taken on?

Deputy H. Miles:

Yes, again, I thank the Deputy for his question. As a result of this question coming forward, I have done a little bit more research. One of the issues that I think is potentially problematic in Jersey is not having the short form of death certificate, which means that the death certificate that is presented to the family, perhaps for probate purposes to take to the bank, to take to D.V.S. (Driver and Vehicle Standards), contains the narrative verdict of the circumstances of the suicide. I can understand that that would be very, very distressing for families. Indeed, earlier this morning, I did have the opportunity to discuss this with the viscount, and I can give the Deputy my assurance that actually we will be looking at this. Obviously, there has to be an official record of death but that does not mean to say that the certificate that proves a person is deceased necessarily has to contain all the information pertaining to their demise. So I hope that satisfies the Deputy.