A matter of life and death: the re-presentation of a musician’s suicide through the lens of the obituary

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Obituary

# Dictionary
A published announcement of a death, often accompanied by a short biography of the dead person.

# Etymology
[C18 from Medieval latin obituarius, from Latin obire to fall, from ob - down + ire - to go]
DEATH NOTICE

VELMA “PENNY” HATFIELD

Age 85, of Deland, Florida, passed away Thursday, December 31, 1992. Born in Mt. Washington, Ohio, Mrs. Hatfield moved to Florida in 1965 from Wooster, Ohio. She was a retired dental assistant for her husband. Mrs. Hatfield was a member of the St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in DeLand, the West Volusia Hospital Auxiliary, the Order of the Eastern Star #320 and the Order of the White Shrine of Jerusalem, Damascus Shrine #11 both of Wooster, Ohio.

She is survived by her husband of 66 years, Waldo E. Hatfield of DeLand; daughter, Jeanne Burleson of Melbourne, Florida; sisters, Ruth Wynn of Clearwater, Florida and Marjorie Nair of Clifton Forge, Virginia; brothers, Langdon Penny of Cincinnati, Ohio and Richard Dunn of Orlando, Florida; two grandchildren, Paul Burleson of Melbourne and Walda Sue Burleson of Stuart, Florida; and two great grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family prefers memorial donations be made to Hospices of Volusia, 655 North Clyde Morris Boulevard, Daytona Beach, Florida 32114.
“…obituary columns pick over the expired human condition and deliver their posthumous review with a formidable exercise of authority. They inform, they enlighten, they entertain; they also have the capacity to offend and wound. There is a duty to present a complete account so that the cause of historical record is satisfied. In composing these posthumous studies, therefore, writers and editors frequently encounter an ethical dilemma in deciding what measure of intimate information should be revealed. The cause of death (particularly if self-inflicted) and the subject’s sexual persuasion appear in this regard as questions of notable complexity.”

Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies - Open University

Ethical issues

5. Intrusion into grief or shock

i) In cases involving personal grief or shock, enquiries and approaches must be made with sympathy and discretion and publication handled sensitively. This should not restrict the right to report legal proceedings, such as inquests.

NUJ Code of Conduct

6. Does nothing to intrude into anybody’s private life, grief or distress unless justified by overriding consideration of the public interest

*ii) When reporting suicide, care should be taken to avoid excessive detail about the method used.
Question of style (guides)

Alana Baranick
The most expensive obit in history?

“It seems inconceivable that Blossom Dearie should die of old age”

Forever 27 Club
"Now he's gone and joined that stupid club. I told him not to join that stupid club."

Wendy Cobain in the Aberdeen Daily World
‘Elvis to Eminem: quantifying the price of fame through early mortality of European and North American rock and pop stars’

“Rock'n'roll is the perfect scenario for people who need a lot of attention, who were ignored as kids. It's the most indulged, ridiculous situation. It used to be that as a rock star everyone was happy if you killed yourself.”

Michael Hutchence, *Q*, 1993
Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse
Critical Discourse Analysis
**Holding the space**


- New York Times - *Portraits of Grief*


Mark Linkous

- Broadsheets
- Euphemisms
- Age
- Scene
- ‘haunting’
- OD-induced heart attack
- Drugs use
- Depression
- Musical themes of death
- Other musician-suicides
- Posthumous work
- Images
“There is no such thing as bad publicity except your own obituary.”

Brendan F. Behan