

The Media and Suicide

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Abstract

Suicide is a common and preventable event that is often reported by the media when there are sensationalistic elements or if the suicide involves a celebrity. Media reports of suicide can induce a copycat or “Werther effect”. There is increasing evidence that sensationalistic reporting of suicides has a direct effect on increasing suicide rates. Responsible reporting guidelines drawn up in consultation with media professionals have been shown to improve reporting of suicides. Local reporting on suicides tends to be sensationalistic but also has a strong educational slant. The media should educate both the public and the medical professional about their role in suicide prevention.

Ann Acad Med Singapore 2008;37:797-9

Key words: Singapore, Suicide prevention, Werther effect

The Burden of Suicide

Suicide worldwide is estimated to represent 1.8% of the total global burden of disease in 1998, and 2.4% in countries with market and former socialist economies in 2020. This is equal to the burden due to wars and homicide, roughly twice the burden of diabetes and equal to the burden of birth asphyxia and trauma. Although traditionally suicide rates have been highest among the male elderly, rates among young people have been increasing to such an extent that they are now the group at highest risk in a third of countries, in both developed and developing countries. In 2000, approximately 1 million people died from suicide, a “global” mortality rate of 16 per 100,000, or 1 death every 40 seconds.¹

Local suicide rates have been on the rise with 419 suicides in 2006, up from 346 in 2003. The suicide rate has been increasing for 4 years in a row with the current rate at 10.3 per 100,000.²

The Link between Media and Suicide

The link between the media and suicide was first brought to light after Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Man Werther* in the late 18th century. The protagonist of the story falls in love with a lady who is beyond his reach. He decides to commit suicide by shooting himself while dressed in a blue coat, yellow vest and boots while seated at his desk.

The publication of this novel was followed by a spate of “copycat” suicides across Europe. So serious was the problem that subsequent editions added a disclaimer “*Be a man, he said; do not follow my example*”.³ Subsequently, Phillips⁴ described in a landmark paper the relationship between news media reports of suicide and subsequent suicidal behaviour. He coined the term “Werther Effect” to describe the situation where an observer copies behaviour he has seen modelled in the media.

Explanations of the media impact on suicide have centred on social learning theory or modelling.⁵ This theory states that if one learns that there are troubled people who solve life’s problems through suicide, others who identify with them may copy the behaviour. In addition, there is the concept of differential identification that refines this concept by postulating that the impact a story has is directly related to the degree of identification they have with the type of story (e.g. of celebrities), perhaps accounting for the greater impact of celebrity suicide reporting. The last explanation describes how the audience mood (i.e. suicidogenic conditions such as high unemployment and divorce rates) increases the copycat effect of suicide reports.

There is mounting evidence of a direct relationship between media reporting of suicide and increased suicide rates. Gould’s⁶ review of media effects on suicide shows that 69% of non-fictional media reports of suicides showed

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an apparent imitative effect. Stack⁷ used logistic regression analysis to show that the studies measuring the copycat effect of either an entertainment or political celebrity suicide story was 14.3 times more likely than studies that did not. He also showed that studies based on real as opposed to fictional stories were 4.03 times as likely to uncover a copycat effect and that research based on televised stories was 82% less likely than research based on newspapers to find a copycat effect, possibly due to the transient nature of television reports.

One shortcoming of most studies between media and suicide is that the exposure to media reports by those engaged in suicidal behaviour was not assessed. A recent study in Taiwan demonstrated the direct link between media exposure and suicide attempts. Cheng et al⁸ showed that there was a marked increase in the number of suicide attempts during the 3-week period after media reporting of a celebrity suicide (RR, 1.55; CI, 1.26-1.91) with 23.4% of suicide attempters reporting an influence from media reports.

Which Suicides are Reported and Why?

Another factor influencing the relationship between the media and suicide is the type of suicide that is reported. Pirkis et al⁹ showed that while only 1% of suicides is reported in the media, there was evidence of over-reporting of suicide by older people, females and those using dramatic methods (drowning, gunshot, cutting, stabbing). They also found that reporting of suicide generally fell into 3 categories: Those falling into a broader context (e.g. system failures, inadequate mental health resources, workforce stressors), those involving local/national celebrities or respected community leaders who had fallen from grace, and the last category was those where the circumstances or method of suicide was particularly unusual (e.g. murder-suicides, paying for their own execution).

A very pragmatic reason for such reporting is (as seen by media professionals) a need to attract and maintain audiences.¹⁰ Most media see their remit as focusing firmly upon entertainment rather than education.¹¹ Nairn¹² concluded that “*journalists organize their materials to present the appearance of objectivity, while giving priority to newsworthy elements understood to attract readers... which are conflict and deviance*”. Given the time and space constraints of media, conflicting material is avoided in the name of economy and at the same time reinforcing stereotypes.

Media Reporting Guidelines

Responsible media reporting appears to decrease suicide. Vienna experienced a large number of dramatic suicides caused by jumping in front of trains after the subway was built in 1978. The Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention drafted media guidelines for responsible suicide

reporting in 1987 and the methods of suicides were no longer reported in the newspapers. The rates of subway suicide decreased by 80% in the next 6 months and remained at a low level. Overall suicides decreased only slightly, supporting the theory that the guidelines resulted in the decline in subway suicides.¹³

Pirkis et al¹⁴ reviewed 9 major guidelines for responsible media reporting of suicide and found very similar elements. However, they differed in the way they were developed (i.e. the extent to which media professionals were involved) and implemented, which resulted in differential impact on the behaviour of media professionals. It was postulated that guidelines that sought the opinion of media professionals and chose an active dissemination strategy were more likely to be effective than those that were developed in isolation and simply made available. Seven common elements were identified:

- Avoid sensationalising or glamorising suicide or giving it undue prominence
- Avoid providing specific details about the suicide
- Recognise the importance of role models (i.e. impact of celebrities)
- Take the opportunity to educate the public about the myths of suicide
- Provide help/support to vulnerable readers/viewers
- Consider the aftermath of suicide (e.g. being sensitive when interviewing the bereaved, describing the effects the suicide has on the family members)
- Acknowledge that journalists are vulnerable as well

The Local Situation

The *Straits Times* published its own guideline¹⁵ that shares some of the elements above but puts a greater emphasis on public education. The guidelines are to publish articles containing:

- Newsworthy trends that emerge backed by reliable statistics
- Newsworthy findings that emerge from researchers
- Publicity for large-scale intervention programmes
- Stories with facets of public interest
- Celebrities who take their lives (but not to romanticise it)
- Articles that educate readers on how to spot those who are potentially suicidal and provide contact numbers of crisis hotlines

A review of the *Straits Times* articles reporting suicides from January 2002 to July 2007 was performed by the first author. The articles were accessed from a professional media website which had comprehensive records of major English newspapers. In total, 157 articles were found with

the word “suicide” in the title, of which 78 (49.7%) were analysed for its adherence with suicide reporting guidelines. The excluded articles did not deal with suicide attempts and were mostly about suicide bombers (38%) and the rest were miscellaneous articles (12.3%) covering topics from war crimes to antidepressants.

Of the 78 articles analysed, 75.6% (59/78) were sensationalistic in nature and 51.3% (40/78) gave specific details about the suicide method. Only 60.3% (47/78) of reports dealt with individual suicides and of these, 21.3% (10/47) reported on celebrities. Only 30.8% (24/78) provided education about suicide myths and avenues of help and 21.8% (17/78) considered the aftermath of suicide on the family. Seventeen articles (21.8%) were educational. Sixteen (20.5%) were multiple reports of the same suicide usually within a few days of one another, often repeating the sensational details. What we can conclude from this data is that despite the *Straits Times*’ emphasis on public education, only a fifth of the articles about suicide actually deals with education while the vast majority of suicide articles are designed to help sell newspapers.

What can be done to Prevent Suicides?

From a public health perspective it is prudent for the medical community to positively influence the media’s presentation of suicide. As described above, the media reports of suicide are often skewed for sensationalism and tend to simplify the reasons for suicide without providing avenues of help. Suicide myths are sometimes perpetuated as seen in comments made by the state coroner¹⁶ about the spate of Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) suicides (“*At the end of the day, when someone is determined to take his own life, there is little that the rest of society can do.*”) despite direct evidence to the contrary.¹⁷ It is possible to actively engage the public media and change suicide reporting trends as seen in the Swiss¹⁸ experience. A press conference between the media, suicidologists and the Swiss Medical Association in 1992 resulted in a decrease in front page stories of suicide from 20% to 4% and decreased the proportion of

stories with sensational headlines from 60% to 25%. The media should educate both the public and the medical professional about their role in suicide prevention.

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