

SUICIDE & THE MEDIA: PITFALLS AND PREVENTION

Report on a Seminar organised by the Reuters Foundation Programme at
Green College and the Oxford University Centre for Suicide Research (CSR)
at Green College's Osler-McGovern Centre, Oxford

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Introduction

The aims of the Reuters/CSR “Suicide and the Media” meeting were two-fold: (i) to bring together media professionals, medical researchers and experts to examine the existing evidence for a media influence on suicidal behaviour and its prevention; (ii) to provide a forum for discussion of the issues and challenges raised, in order to highlight future practical steps to address this matter constructively.

The meeting was attended by representatives of the Department of Health, the National Institute for Mental Health in England, Royal College of Psychiatrists, Samaritans, Rethink, Mental Health Media, PressWise Trust, and research organisations, and also local and national politicians.

Three speakers, Professor Keith Hawton, Director of the Centre for Suicide Research, Chris Frost, Head of Journalism Department, John Moores University, Liverpool, and Simon Armson, Chief Executive of Samaritans, gave presentations based on their areas of expertise in relation to media and suicide. Jane Drabble, Chair of Mental Health Media and formerly Director of BBC Education, chaired the meeting, introducing the central dilemma of how to produce challenging, provocative and informative media output for the majority who are not at risk, but at the same time protect the interests of the minority who are at risk.

The Research Evidence

Keith Hawton presented the findings of a large, international, systematic review of the existing research literature, examining the influence of the media on suicidal behaviour. The review, covering approximately 200 articles, included naturalistic observations, content analyses, anecdotal reports and experimental studies, all of which considered the influence of the media's portrayal of suicidal behaviour on rates of attempted or completed suicide, or on the methods used in these acts. A few articles addressed prevention of negative media influences on suicidal behaviour.

News reports of suicide Thirty studies were found which examined the possible impact of reporting of suicide in newspapers. In 21 there was evidence of an increase in suicides after the reports, with 10 of these also finding evidence of a causal link between the reported suicide(s) and those occurring following the report.

There is limited evidence to suggest that the reporting of a particular method of suicide increases the use of this method by others. This phenomenon is particularly easy to observe where the method is unusual. One striking example of this is the recent dramatic increase in suicide through inhalation of charcoal fumes in Hong Kong following a graphic newspaper depiction of a suicide by this method. A second was the marked increase in the use of anti-freeze as a poisoning agent in the immediate aftermath of the dramatic reporting of the use of this method in a suicide attempt.

Of 13 studies of television news reports of suicides on at least two of three national TV networks in the USA, an increase in suicide rates was found after the reports in 10 of the studies. Five of these 'positive' studies were of teenage suicide rates and one was of suicide rates in elderly people. Of 10 further studies of news coverage of suicides in more than one news medium, an increase in suicide rates was found in six. In some there was clear evidence of the direct impact of the reports on subsequent suicides (e.g. following the suicide of a very popular Japanese pop singer and of Miss Hungary).

Fictional suicides Seven studies were identified which examined the possible impact of portrayal of suicide attempts in films or soaps. Significant increases in attempted suicide had been found in four of them. An example was presented in which the evidence of a causal effect was particularly strong. Six studies were identified in which there had been portrayal of suicide in films or on television. An increase in suicidal behaviour had been found following five of these. A particularly dramatic example was a six-part German TV drama in which the

young hero of the story died through suicide on the railway. A substantial rise in railway suicides occurred in young people during and after the series, a phenomenon that recurred when the series was re-shown some years later.

Prevention There are a few examples where modifications of reporting procedures for suicide have been achieved, two of which appeared to lead to reductions in imitative behaviour. Newspaper editors in Switzerland changed their policies on suicide reporting following consultation and collaboration with researchers. After the policies were implemented, there was a reduction in the 'imitation risk score' of reports, including, for example, the length of reports, dramatic reporting, and use of pictures of the individuals who died by suicide or the sites of their deaths. However, the possible impact of this initiative was not assessed. Studies conducted in Vienna and Toronto demonstrated that voluntary restrictions on newspaper reporting of subway suicides following a similar collaborative initiative were followed by a decreased number of suicides by this method.

In none of the studies reviewed was there a **reduction** in suicide rates or a **decrease** in the use of particular methods below baseline levels following the reporting of a suicide, although it was noted that a bias towards publication of significant results might be particularly likely in the case of studies examining the influence of the media on suicidal behaviour.

In summary the current research evidence suggests that:

- Media reporting or portrayal of suicides **can** influence suicidal behaviour, leading to:
 - Increases in the overall number of suicides
 - Increases in the use of particular methods of suicide
- In contrast there is no published evidence to suggest that reporting of suicides reduces suicidal behaviour by others below baseline levels or 'puts people off attempting suicide.
- There is no evidence to suggest a 'rebound' effect: increases in suicide rate or in the use of a particular method following the report of a suicide in the media are not simply the result of bringing forward in time suicides that would have occurred later anyway.

- Various characteristics of the reporting or portrayal of a suicide and the audience it reaches are thought to increase risk of imitative behaviour. These include:

Characteristics of the reporting:

- Inclusion of detailed information about a suicide method
- Reporting that is prominent or repetitive
- The person involved is a celebrity

Characteristics of audience:

- Young people, and, possibly, the elderly, may be particularly vulnerable to media influences
- Similarity between the audience and the suicide in the media in terms of age, gender and nationality

- In addition, it is found that:
 - Mental health problems of people who die by suicide are typically overlooked in reporting of suicides
 - The causes of suicidal behaviour are often portrayed too simply, suicide tending to be attributed to single factors (e.g. relationship break-up, an exam failure), in contrast to the more complex explanations found in reality.

BUT...

- Modifications of reporting are possible and can lead to significant reductions in imitative suicidal behaviour

Media Perspectives

Chris Frost outlined the issues that suicide poses for the journalist, both as a dramatic story of human tragedy and as a complex ethical dilemma. Additionally the importance of considering the coverage of suicide within the wider journalistic context was emphasised.

Key points arising from the presentation and discussion:

- Suicide is a newsworthy event. Newsworthiness of events is determined by their being unambiguous, involving rapid change and touching on issues that are of concern to many individuals. In addition, suicides may occur in a public arena (for example railway suicides), or may involve individuals who are well known (for example in local reporting of suicides or in the suicides of celebrities), which contributes to their newsworthiness.
- Journalists work under intense time pressure. Whilst this cannot be used as an excuse for poor reporting, it is nevertheless the case that decisions about very sensitive issues must be made rapidly. Thus for guidelines to be of use they must be readily available.
- Whilst suicide is an unambiguous event and is easily understandable to the audience, background factors may be difficult to determine (especially because family members are likely to be in distress and medical professionals are unable to comment on a particular individual's likely mental state). Background factors may also require considerable explanation in order to be understandable to the reader and this may compromise the immediacy of a piece. Since the space available for a feature is often very limited, the focus of a piece is likely to be on the death event, rather than the factors leading up to it.
- A number of guidelines are available for journalists, including those developed by the BBC, the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), and the Press Complaints Commission. The Press Complaints Commission guidelines are the most influential but do not currently deal specifically with suicide, but only the broader category of private grief.
- As part of good professional practice, journalists should always be sensitive to issues of taste and decency, to the risk of copycat attempts, to oversimplification of a complex issue and to intrusion into grief.

Preventive Initiatives

Simon Armson highlighted the fact that whilst reporters should attempt to achieve balance and avoid exploitation, glorification or sensationalisation of suicides, censorship and misinformation are equally unhelpful. In order to achieve progress, it is necessary to present the facts and confront the stigma associated with mental health problems and suicidal behaviour.

The two key areas in which the media may be able to act are:

- (i) Prevention of imitative suicidal behaviour following a suicide (through responsible reporting);
- (ii) Prevention of the perpetuation of stigma surrounding suicide and mental illness, and challenging myths.

It was emphasised once again that it is proper and appropriate that suicides should be reported upon, especially where they occur in institutions such as prisons or hospitals that hold a duty of care. The key issues are how this is done, and what the guiding principles should be. Clearly the constraints placed on certain types of reporting, including the time frame and environment in which the work is being done, influence the form that the reporting of a suicide will take. However, it was suggested that, even within the tightest schedule, it should be possible to consider the tone and underlying message of a piece.

It was stressed that it would be preferable for any initiatives concerning media coverage of suicide to come from journalists themselves rather than being imposed from the outside, with PressWise Trust highlighted as an excellent example of an organisation that provides guidelines developed by journalists for journalists. The importance and potential strength of partnerships between journalists and other advisory groups were also highlighted.

Discussion

The seminar was reminded that the fourth goal of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy is to improve the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behaviour in the media. With this in mind the discussion focused on how we might move towards this end and how information might best be disseminated to media professionals, both information concerning the research evidence linking reporting of suicides to imitative behaviour, and concerning models of good practice in the coverage of suicide by the media.

Potential barriers to the adoption of suggested guidelines for the reporting of suicide

Reporting restraints

It was suggested that journalists have an instinct to bring information into the public domain, and that the inclusion of detailed information about an event, such as a suicide, is seen to add authenticity to a feature. Some members of the audience expressed unease at the idea that a journalist should be asked to restrain their reporting and questioned where such practices might lead. For example, it was suggested that a precedent would be set and that the reporting of other types of events that might be the focus of imitative behaviour (such as gun-crimes) would also become subject to modification.

In response to these concerns it was emphasised that reporting is inherently selective and that the modifications of reporting suggested would in fact be minor (for example, not reporting the number or type of tablets taken in a completed suicide, or avoiding stigmatising language, or omitting graphic images of the scene of a suicide). One member of the audience whose media organisation had adopted guidelines for the reporting of suicide suggested that in the majority of cases modifications would be unlikely to significantly alter the overall thrust of an article, and that journalists might often include such information more out of habit than because it was central to the feature. It was also noted that in the case of criminal activity the reporting of such details was often prevented by law, so it was difficult to draw direct comparisons between the two situations.

Graphic reporting as a deterrent to suicide?

Some members of the audience raised the suggestion that reporting of the graphic and disturbing details of suicides might act as a deterrent, putting people off suicide as a solution to their problems, and that in fact 'sanitising' the reporting of suicides might encourage suicidal behaviour. However, it was pointed out that, on the basis of the research evidence, this was very unlikely to be the case.

Although there is evidence to suggest that features which include graphic or disturbing images of suicide methods may inform the majority of the audience about the dangers of a particular method, those individuals who are most at risk may actually be attracted to or encouraged by the same graphic details. For example, it was noted that, in Asia, altering the depiction of the consequences of ingesting insecticides and agricultural chemicals from graphic and highly threatening ("one swallow can kill") to more modest depiction ("harmful") resulted in a *reduction* in the use of such chemicals for suicide.

It was accepted that it is difficult to determine the likely impact of a graphic report of suicide on an individual whose state of mind is disturbed, and that whilst for some individuals graphic portrayal may act as a deterrent, for others it is likely to increase risk. Additionally it was noted that emphasising or selectively reporting the horrible consequences of a suicide also represents a deliberate distortion of the truth, and one that, at least for some suicidal people, may be very dangerous.

Lack of awareness within the media

Another theme that emerged in the discussion was the belief that there was a general lack of awareness amongst the media community, firstly of the research evidence suggesting a media influence on suicidal behaviour, and secondly of the guidelines in place to advise on reporting of such issues. Some members of the audience felt that if journalists were properly informed then they would be very likely to adopt guidelines and that lack of awareness rather than resistance was likely to be the primary problem in the wider journalistic community.

One individual spoke of the experience of introducing a specific policy for the reporting of suicide at his place of work and the fact that individuals who were initially uncertain found the guidelines acceptable following a discussion of the issues. Related to the issue of awareness was the issue of who information should be aimed at. Many of the decisions likely to be influenced by guidelines, for example concerning the publication of graphic images, are editorial decisions. Therefore it was considered that in order for there to be a change in

reporting practice it would be necessary to target information at the level of middle management, editors and sub-editors, as well as to inform reporters themselves.

Opportunities for disseminating information

Care should be taken to disseminate research findings concerning the link between the media and imitative suicidal behaviour sensitively since the findings may themselves be subject to sensationalised reporting which would be unhelpful. By presenting the findings in the context of responsible journalism practice, they are likely to be better received and acted upon. A number of suggestions were made for ways in which it might be possible to improve media reporting and portrayal of suicide. The need in any initiatives for close collaboration across disciplines, and between researchers, policy makers, and, above all, those responsible for journalism and other types of media was greatly emphasised.

Guideline development

The Press Complaints Commission does not have guidelines specifically addressing the issue of suicide although they are currently considering the issue of reporting around vulnerable groups. However, it was noted that they receive lots of complaints about the coverage of suicide. It would be relatively easy to insert a clause relating to suicide into the current guidelines in the context of those guidelines that relate to grief and harm.

OFCOM will also be developing guidelines in the near future, which will include those concerning the coverage of sensitive issues. It might be possible to provide input to these guidelines, to encourage OFCOM to address the issues surrounding media handling of suicide and suicidal behaviour. Finally, there may be lessons to be learned from overseas. In Australia, Stigma Watch, a voluntary organisation, works with the media to identify examples of good practice, and works with those who have poor practice to improve reporting. This approach has been well received and there may be benefits to exploring the idea of having a similar network in the United Kingdom.

Education and training

It was suggested that in order to bring about change in media handling of suicide it would be necessary to change the culture of media institutions. This was likely to be brought about best

by education and a consciousness change at grassroots level as well as by informing editorial staff, and through the adoption of guidelines and codes of practice. The Press Complaints Commission provides a training pack dealing with issues surrounding the coverage of suicide, which is available for journalists, but other opportunities for journalism training and for raising the awareness of these issues amongst editorial staff may also be needed.

Discussion and debate

There was support for the idea of a meeting, which might appropriately be hosted by the Reuters Foundation, to involve the Society of Editors in order to promote discussion of the issues. Other forums for discussion and debate include the Organisation of News Ombudsmen (which will be holding a conference in London in May 2005, hosted by The Guardian newspaper), the World Association of Newspapers, the Edinburgh International Television Festival and the Radio Academy.

There was felt to be a need for a coordinating body that would hold responsibility for following up on the concerns raised at the seminar. Green College, with its strong medical associations and the presence of the Reuters Programme, might be well placed to base a Medical Science and the Media programme to take this agenda further.

Summary of potential future initiatives

1. Encourage the Press Complaints Commission and OFCOM to include guidelines on media reporting and portrayal of suicide.
2. Investigate opportunities for having training on this topic adopted in journalism and media studies courses.
3. Investigate opportunities for raising the awareness of editorial staff on this issue.
4. Consider the development of an organisation to identify examples of good practice, and to work with those with poor practice to improve reporting and portrayal of suicide
5. Investigate other forums for debating the issue, including the Organisation of News Ombudsmen, the World Association of Newspapers, the Edinburgh International Television Festival and the Radio Academy.
6. Develop further research approaches to investigating the issue and to evaluating initiatives to improve practice.

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