Reporting of Suicide in the New Zealand Media; a research study

'Reporting of Suicide in the New Zealand Media’ provides important information about the way suicide is portrayed in the New Zealand media. This information is useful to those working in both suicide prevention and the news media.

What is the ‘Reporting of Suicide in the New Zealand Media’ study?

This research is a descriptive account of the extent and nature of the reporting of suicide by New Zealand’s news media. It also assesses the alignment of news media stories with best practice standards for reporting suicide set out in Ministry of Health guidelines (1999). This analysis is complemented by five case studies which thematically examine a selection of news media stories. The study’s methodology was informed by the Australian Media Monitoring project undertaken by Pirkis et al (2001).

Why undertake this research?

Between 2000 and 2007 an average of 500 New Zealanders died annually by suicide (Ministry of Health, 2007). International research suggests that media reporting can impact both negatively and positively on suicidal behaviour. Research investigating the negative consequences of media reporting highlights the harmful effects of sensationalist reporting and the effect of reporting specific suicide methods on ‘copycat’ behaviour (Jobes, Berman, O’Carroll, Eastgard, & Knickmeyer, 1996; Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007; Pirkis et al., 2002; Stack, 1996, 2000a). However, no studies have investigated the nature and extent of how suicide is reported in New Zealand. This research provides a baseline picture of how suicide is currently reported in New Zealand.

Who undertook this research?

The content and case study analysis of reporting of suicide in the media was undertaken in 2009 by the Centre for Mental Health Research at the University of Auckland. It was completed as part of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2008-2012 and funded by the Ministry of Health through Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui: The National Centre of Mental Health Research, Information and Workforce Development.

What methodology was used?

The study used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to review radio, television, newspaper and internet mainstream news coverage of suicide collected over a 12-month period beginning 1 August 2008.

The quantitative analysis provides a descriptive account of the nature and extent of reporting of suicide by the New Zealand news media. It assesses the alignment of news media items with best practice standards for reporting set out in Ministry of Health guidelines (1999) and with section 71 of the Coroners Act 2006.

The qualitative analysis presents five case studies which focus on the reporting of suicide in relation to: online media, celebrities, murder-suicide, economic crisis and mental health services. They examine the nature of the media reporting and how suicide is characteristically framed by New Zealand media in relation to the chosen topics.
What did the research find?

This research provides the first comprehensive baseline picture of the extent and nature of the reporting of suicide by New Zealand’s news media.

In particular, the research found that:

- most items portrayed suicide in an appropriate manner according to Ministry of Health guidelines
- few items reported in such a way as to normalise suicide
- most items were located appropriately, did not use the word ‘suicide’ in the headline and did not include inappropriate footage of the suicide scene or methods

Overall the quality of reporting was above average and paints a very different picture than much of the international literature (Gould, 2001; Gould & Romer, 2003; Hawton & William, 2001; Martin, 2004; Stack, 2000b). However, the media did not appear to provide educational or help-seeking information when reporting suicide.

What is the next step for the Reporting of Suicide in the New Zealand Media study?

The report is available publicly from the Te Pou website: www.tepou.co.nz. It is anticipated that the research team will also publish papers and present at conferences to disseminate the results of this research.

Media enquiries

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For the most up to date information on this project please visit www.tepou.co.nz

References:


