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Guidelines For

MEDIA REPORTING

On Suicide



Disease Control Division
Ministry of Health Malaysia



Guidelines For **Media Reporting** On Suicide

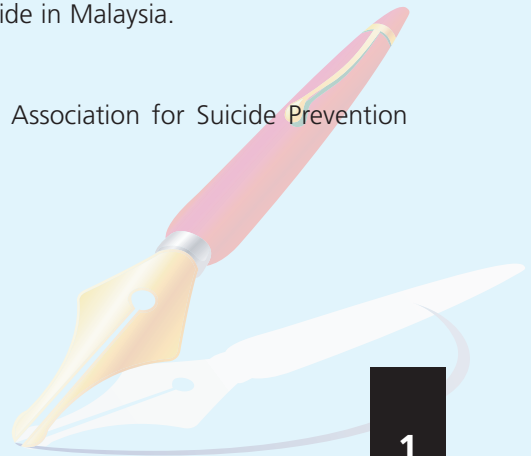
PREFACE

Suicide is now important public health problem whereby each year, according to WHO estimates approximately 1 million people prematurely take their own lives representing one death every 40 seconds. In Malaysia, it is estimated 1-2 suicide occur every day based on National suicide Registry Report. As a serious public health problem it demands our attention and it is certainly not an easy task.

It is known that the media plays a pivotal role in providing information and strongly influences individual beliefs, attitude and practices. Inappropriate reporting of suicide poses a potentially harmful impact to those who are depressed and has suicidal tendency.

To assist and facilitate the media in appropriate and responsible reporting on suicide, "Guidelines For Media Reporting On Suicide" was developed by representatives from various media, and facilitated by the Mental Health Unit of Disease Control Division, Ministry of Health. The objective of this guideline is to promote responsible reporting on suicide by the media so as to reduce imitation suicide in Malaysia.

In the year 2003, the International Association for Suicide Prevention

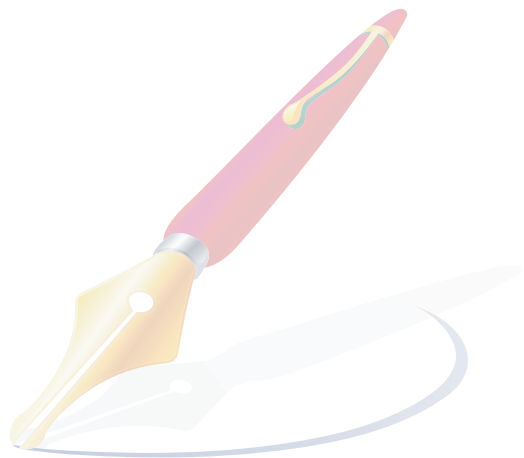


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1. BACKGROUND

(IASP), launched the World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10th, with WHO's co-sponsorship. Following this, in year 2004, the celebration of World Suicide Prevention Day was observed worldwide. Subsequently in Malaysia, World Suicide Prevention Day was celebrated for the first time on 14th October 2004. The theme was "Media as Partners In Advocacy For Suicide Prevention". We, in Malaysia, carried out a seminar and workshop on suicide prevention for the media. The seminar was attended by reporters and newscasters from various printed and electronic media as well as State Health Education Officers from the Ministry of Health. The objective of the seminar was to create awareness for the media on responsible suicide reporting and develop the "Guidelines for Media Reporting on Suicide" in Malaysia.

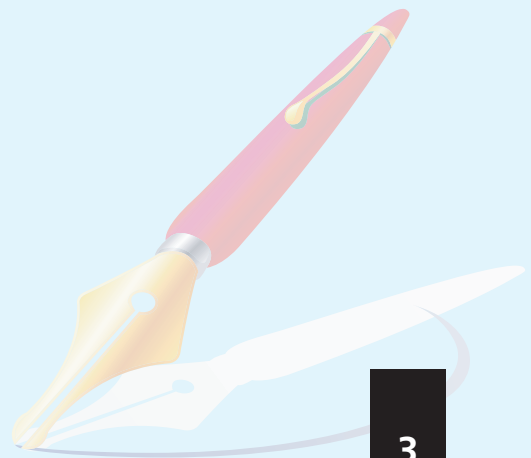
Media play a significant role in today's society by providing a wide range



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2. INTRODUCTION

of information in a variety of ways. They strongly influence community attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, and play a vital role in politics, economics and social practice. Because of that influence, media can also play an active role in the prevention of suicide. The degree of publicity given to a suicide story can be linked to the number of subsequent suicides. Television also influences suicidal behaviour. Studies have shown that there is an increase in suicide after inappropriate television news reports of cases of suicide. In the printed media, highly publicized stories that appear in multiple programmes on multiple channels seem to carry the greatest impact – all the more so if they involve celebrities. Based on the “Preventing Suicide - Resource For Media Professionals”



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3. DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDELINES FOR REPORTING ON SUICIDE

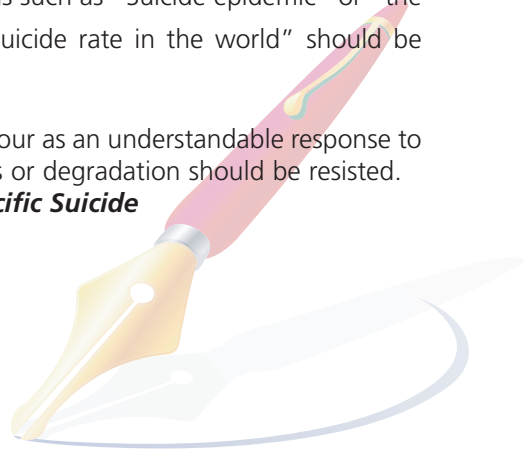
by WHO 2000, the “Guidelines for Media Reporting on Suicide” was developed

3.1 General Consideration

Specific issues that need to be addressed when reporting on suicide include the followings:

- i) Statistics should be interpreted carefully and correctly
- ii) Authentic and reliable sources should be used
- iii) Impromptu comments sources should be handled carefully in spite of time pressures
- iv) Generalizations based on small figures require particular attention, and expressions such as “Suicide epidemic” or “the place with the highest suicide rate in the world” should be avoided
- v) Reporting suicidal behaviour as an understandable response to social or cultural changes or degradation should be resisted.

3.2 How To Report On A Specific Suicide



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The following points should be borne in mind the advent of reporting the suicide story:

- i) Avoid sensational coverage of suicide. Never publish the suicide reports as front headlines. The coverage should be minimized to the extent possible. Any mental health problem of the deceased should be acknowledged. Every effort should be made to avoid over statement. Photographs of the deceased, of the methods used and of the scene of the suicide are to be avoided.
- ii) As research have shown that media coverage of suicide has a greater impact on the method of suicide adopted, therefore detailed descriptions of the method used and how the method was procured should be avoided.
- iii) Suicide is usually caused by a complex interaction of many factors such as mental and physical illness, substances abuse, interpersonal conflicts and family disturbances. It is helpful to acknowledge that variety of factors contributes to suicide and it should not be reported as unexplainable or in a simplistic way.
- iv) Suicide should not be depicted as a method of coping with personal problems such as bankruptcy, examination failure or sexual abuse.
- v) Take into account the impact of suicide on families in terms of stigma and psychological suffering.
- vi) Emphasize on mourning the person's death. Do not glorify suicide victims as objects of public adulation as this would suggest to susceptible persons that society honors suicidal behavior.
- vii) Describe the physical consequences of non-fatal suicidal attempts (**e. g. brain damage, paralysis**) as this can act as a deterrent.

3.3 Providing Information On Help Available

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The media should play a more proactive role in providing assistance to help to prevent suicide by publishing the following information:

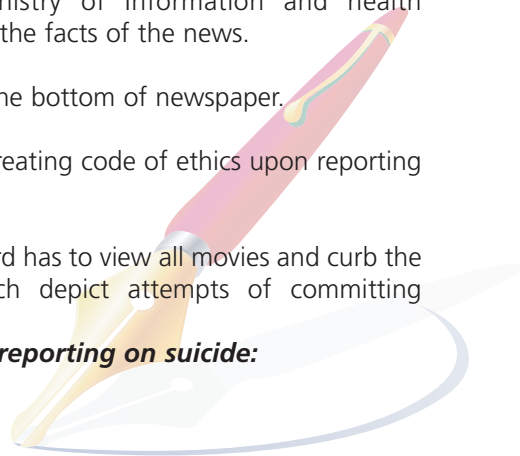
- i) Listing available mental health services and helplines with their up-to-date telephone numbers and addresses.
- ii) Publicizing the warning signs of suicidal behavior.
- iii) Conveying the message that depression is often associated with suicidal behavior and that depression is a treatable condition.
- iv) Offering a message of sympathy to the survivors in their hour of grief and providing telephone numbers of support groups for survivors. This increase the likelihood of intervention by mental health professionals, friends and family in suicidal crisis.

3.4 Summary of Responsible Suicide Reporting RULE OF FIVE

WHAT TO DO when reporting on suicide:

1. Insert positive messages and slogans e. g. Suicide is Preventable.
2. Work closely with Ministry of Information and health authorities in presenting the facts of the news.
3. Include the help-line at the bottom of newspaper.
4. Media should work on creating code of ethics upon reporting news on suicide.
5. National Censorship Board has to view all movies and curb the negative elements which depict attempts of committing suicide.

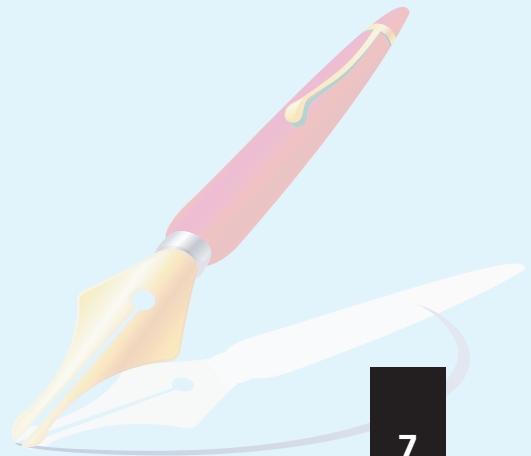
WHAT NOT TO DO when reporting on suicide:



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1. Do not publish photographs or suicide notes in printed media and electronic media.
2. Do not publish the victim's name ***(for celebrities who commit suicide, the media can publish the news with POSITIVE MESSAGES AND PROFESSIONAL VIEWS).***
3. Do not publish the report on suicide in front page to the newspaper and with photograph.
4. Do not report specific details of the methods used in committing suicide.
5. Do not put cultural stereotypes in movies and dramas especially Indian movies and dramas.

We would like to extend our appreciation to the following for



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- *Professor T. Maniam
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- *"The Befrienders"*
- *All Representatives of Printed and Electronic Media*
- *All Officials from Ministry Of Health*

