

# **Suicide and the Media**

**A study of the media response to**

***Suicide and the Media:  
The reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media***

***A Resource***

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The relationship between health professionals working in suicide prevention and media organisations generally has not been harmonious. Health professionals, concerned that the irresponsible reporting of suicide may lead to contagion or copycat behaviours, wish to see reporting guidelines for the media. Media professionals, however, are strongly resistant to potential or actual restrictions on their freedom of expression and dispute any presumption that non-disclosure is in the best interests of society.

This study aimed to scope the awareness of media professionals about suicide reporting guidelines developed by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in 1998 and 1999; to identify the media's issues and concerns about the use of guidelines; and to identify a means of addressing those concerns.

The research comprised a limited literature review, document analysis and semi-structured interviews with senior media professionals.

The key findings are:

- The guidelines developed by the Ministry of Health have been largely ignored by the news media.
- Senior media professionals strongly oppose restrictions on suicide reporting and believe the Coroners Act 1988 is unduly restrictive.
- The development of suicide reporting guidelines acceptable to the news media would require a process of extensive consultation between health professionals and senior media professionals.

The key recommendations are:

1. Mental health professionals should initiate a continuing dialogue with key industry stakeholders based on mutual respect for each other's views. A symposium on suicide and the media convened in a spirit of genuine consultation would be a useful starting point. Following that, mental health professionals should develop relationships with industry bodies such as the Newspaper Publishers Association, the New Zealand Press Council, the New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council, the Radio Broadcasters' Association, the Magazine Publishers Association, the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) New Zealand Section and the Broadcasting Standards Authority.
2. Rather than modifying *Suicide and the Media*, the MOH should consider working with the industry to develop protocols (as proposed by the CPU) that would be "owned" by the industry as a basis for effective self-regulation. Such protocols or guidelines could be incorporated in the codes of practice approved by the Broadcasting Standards Authority and in the statement of principles of the New Zealand Press Council, the two media watchdogs in New Zealand. They could then consider complaints arising from alleged breaches of the codes or the statement of principles.
3. A training kit for journalism schools modelled on the Australian resource, *Response Ability*, should be developed in a New Zealand context and made freely available. The Australian kit's combination of a video, CDs, printed materials and a website was prepared by mental health professionals and

journalism educators. The support of New Zealand journalism educators for curriculum material of this kind should be sought as a top priority.

4. The training kit should also be offered to the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation for its professional training seminars.

# 1. MEDIA ATTITUDES TOWARDS *SUICIDE AND THE MEDIA*: BACKGROUND

## 1.1 The issue

Research findings suggesting certain ways of describing suicides in the news media contribute to “suicide contagion” or “copycat suicide” have underpinned efforts by health professionals to impose guidelines on the reporting of suicide. Health professionals advocating such guidelines believe the weight of evidence indicates an association between non-fictional reporting and actual suicidal behaviour, a view supported by Pirkis and Blood (2001) after an extensive literature review. (They concluded the evidence was more equivocal in the case of fictional presentations of suicides.)

As a result, in New Zealand and other countries, guidelines, codes of practice, other resources and legislation have been promoted and put in place to encourage or enforce responsible reporting of suicides and mental illness. For media professionals, restrictions on how they report the news constitute a serious challenge to the freedom of the press and their right to self-regulation.

## 1.2 Addressing the issue

Other countries show similar responses to the issue of suicide reporting. For example, in the United States, where there are no restrictions on reporting suicides, the Federal Government initiated the development of a set of recommendations in 2001 with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the American Association of Suicidology and the Annenberg Public Policy Centre. Some states (eg Maine, Oregon) have their own policies for youth suicide prevention and have developed media guidelines as a part of these. The Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention has also produced a set of media guidelines for reporting suicide. In the United Kingdom, where there are no special legal restraints on reporting suicides or inquests, resources have been developed to help the media cover suicide-related issues by organisations such as media ethics charity, the PressWise Trust, and The Samaritans. In Australia, the Mindframe national media strategy has provided media professionals with a range of information and educational resources about the portrayal and reporting of mental illness, mental health and suicide. Another comprehensive resource, *Response Ability*, launched in 2001, was developed by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health and the University of Newcastle for use in university journalism courses in Australia. As part of a worldwide initiative for the prevention of suicide (SUPRE), the World Health Organisation published a “resource for media professionals” in 2000.

In a number of countries, media organisations have taken the initiative by producing codes of ethics that address the issue of suicide reporting. For instance in Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Norway, Lithuania, and Sweden, industry-wide codes of ethics contain guidance for newspaper journalists on suicide reporting. In Australia, the Press Council has issued a number of discussion papers and proposed guidelines for reporting suicide in newspapers. There are also a number of Australian in-house codes that refer to suicide reporting. For example, the *Melbourne Herald and Weekly Times* code states that: “When reporting individual cases, do not refer to them as such, except when the public figure or public interest tests apply, Avoid reporting details of suicide methods, Take particular care when reporting youth suicide trends not to imply that suicide is an acceptable means of resolving problems.” Similarly, the

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) code states that: "Reported suicides may encourage others. The ABC tries not to add to this risk. If reported at all (there are reporting restrictions in New South Wales, Queensland, and the Northern Territory), suicides should be reported in moderate terms. Reports should usually avoid details of method, with descriptions in general terms only, unless there is a good reason to go into detail. When the method used is unusual, reports should continue to be circumspect."

In some countries, there are legislative constraints on suicide reporting. For example, some states of Australia, including New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Queensland, have enacted legislation that empowers coroners to prohibit the publication of information about self-inflicted deaths. In New Zealand, the Coroners Act 1988, as amended in 1996, constrains media reporting on suicide. This legislation does not restrict the media from covering the issue of suicide in general, but limits the publication of specific details of individual cases without the permission of the coroner. Section 29 of the Coroners Act states that coroners may provide publicly the basic details of a deceased person's age, name and occupation, and a finding death was self-inflicted. They also have the discretion to release the "detail relating to the manner in which the death occurred, to the circumstances of the death, or to an inquest into the death". In the case of a finding of suicide, the media can publish only the name, address and occupation of the person, the fact an inquest was held and the coroner found the death was self-inflicted. In cases of a suicide finding, the publication of any further details of the proceedings can be made only with the coroner's authority. A review of the Coroners Act was completed late in 2004, although the existing proposals appear unlikely to change the Act as it pertains to the media publication of suicides.

### **1.3 New Zealand's response: *Suicide and the Media***

In January 1998, the then Director-General of Health, Dr Karen Poutasi, announced the publication of a new handbook, *Preventing Suicide: Guidelines for the Media on the Reporting of Suicide*, as "just one step in a range of strategies which need to be put in place to reduce the rate of suicide". Responsible media reporting was identified as an important element of the New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (Goal 4: Support after a suicide), and the World Health Organisation listed the responsible reporting of suicide as one of six preventive steps. Other key strategies included reducing the number of young people with a disadvantaged background or unhappy childhood; upskilling people who had contact with young people; and expanding and improving mental health services.

In March 1998, the Commonwealth Press Union New Zealand Section, wrote to the Minister of Health strongly criticising the lack of consultation with the newspaper industry over the guidelines. The guidelines were subsequently revised after consultation with the media industry, re-named *Suicide and the Media: The reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media. A Resource*, and released in September 1999. The revision aimed to make the document more relevant and accessible to the media. More evidence of the link between the reporting and portrayal of suicide and suicide contagion was provided in response to media organisations which disputed that link.

*Suicide and the Media* is in three parts. The first part discusses research and issues associated with the reporting and portrayal of suicide. Part 2, provides facts about suicide including warning signs of suicidal behaviour and common myths. Part 3

offers practical advice, such as what to do when contacted by suicidal people, contacts and resources. An appendix addresses relevant codes and legislation.

#### **1.4 Research objectives**

This research was undertaken for the Ministry of Youth Development to gauge attitudes towards *Suicide and the Media* among New Zealand media organisations and practitioners.

The research objectives were:

- To scope the awareness of health reporters and editors about the guidelines, their availability and content.
- To identify issues from a media perspective about the use of guidelines.
- To establish the relevance of those concerns, including consideration of practice in other countries.
- To identify means of addressing concerns, including if necessary the development of training materials or modifications to those already available.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A literature review of research on suicide and the media was done (Appendix 1) to provide a context for the main study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or by telephone with 12 people, either associated with significant industry organisations or senior editorial executives across a range of media. They were asked to:

- indicate their awareness of the MOH resource and to comment on its contents
- comment on the Coroners Act
- discuss criteria that would make suicide newsworthy
- discuss what would constitute responsible reporting of suicide
- discuss any relevant cases
- comment on their understanding of research on suicide and the media.

Their responses were noted in writing.

All 12 people approached, agreed to participate. However, three attempts to arrange an interview time with a senior Television New Zealand news executive were unsuccessful. Two interviewees did not wish to be identified.

Those cited in the report are:

Donna Chisholm, Deputy Editor, *Sunday Star Times*

Gavin Ellis, Chairperson, Commonwealth Press Union New Zealand Section

Nicola Legat, Editor, *Metro* magazine

Venetia Sherson, former Editor *Waikato Times*

Justine Short, Chief of Staff, TV3

Terry Snow, New Zealand Press Council

Paul Thompson, Editor, *The Press*

Bruce Wallace, Executive Officer, New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council

Dave Wood, Editor, *Timaru Herald*.

Documents, including correspondence, were provided by the Commonwealth Press Union, Terry Snow and Venetia Sherson and accessed via the internet. Any documents used are cited in the report.

### 3. MEDIA INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES ON *SUICIDE AND THE MEDIA*

#### 3.1 Background

The New Zealand section of the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU), describes itself as “the leading newspaper industry organisation which concerns itself with Press Freedom matters”. It comprises virtually all the editors and publishers of daily and Sunday newspapers in New Zealand. As such, it represents the authoritative voice of the newspaper industry. The CPU is a strong advocate which makes submissions on proposed legislation and regulations that may impact on the media generally, and the print media in particular. Its submissions on general issues of media freedom and regulation may be supported by the New Zealand Television Broadcasters’ Council which represents free-to-air networks. In 2002, following the success of a united media approach to the Government on the proposed re-introduction of criminal libel, the CPU’s media freedom committee invited representatives from television, radio and magazines to attend its meetings. The other prime voice reflecting the print industry is the New Zealand Press Council (NZPC), established in 1972 as the self-regulatory watchdog over ethical practice, originally by daily newspapers but later also by community newspapers and most magazines.

#### 3.2 The 1998 Ministry of Health (MOH) guidelines

In March 1998, the CPU wrote to the then Minister of Health Bill English expressing concern that *Preventing Suicide: Guidelines for the Media on the Reporting of Suicide* had been published in January that year by the MOH with “inadequate consultation with the newspaper industry”. The CPU’s New Zealand section chairperson Gavin Ellis recalls there was no consultation and the guidelines “fell on deaf ears”. The CPU referred to submissions it had made to the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MYA) in September 1997 about the discussion document on the development of a national strategy to help prevent youth suicide in New Zealand. The thrust of that submission continues to be reflected in the views of both the CPU and individual editors interviewed for this study. The CPU then wrote, “We believe that New Zealand’s comparatively high rate of youth suicide suggests that current policies are not working. One of these policies is that the media is highly restricted in what it can report about any suicide including youth suicide. We believe that now is a good time for that policy to be revisited by Government with a view to changing the Coroners Act and encouraging more open dialogue in the media and elsewhere about suicide in general and youth suicide in particular” (CPU 1997). For the CPU, a less restrictive regime would reduce the “mythical nature of suicide itself”. It proposed reform of the Coroners Act 1988 along the lines of what it understood to be the situation in Australia: details of a suicide would normally be publicly released unless there was good reason for the coroner to suppress them.

The 1997 submission made a number of other points which continue to be expressed by industry people:

- Newspapers are an ideal forum in which to provide educational initiatives which promote the mental health and wellbeing of young people.
- An ill-informed public cannot make rational contributions to youth suicide prevention strategies.
- There is no evidence the New Zealand media, particularly newspapers, report and describe suicide irresponsibly.

- Overseas research on “copycat” and cluster suicides has little or no relevance to New Zealand where the reporting of suicide is highly restricted.
- The scientific evidence invoked to link media coverage with copycat suicides is not conclusive.

The CPU also sent Bill English a copy of a letter dated 10 February 1998 from the MOH’s Chief Psychiatric Advisor, Director of Mental Health, Dr Janice Wilson. Dr Wilson took issue with comments in the media attributed to the CPU honorary secretary Phil O’Reilly. The CPU told the Minister it was concerned about the letter and hoped the Minister would see its concerns about a lack of consultation from the MOH were well-founded. Dr Wilson strongly disputed the suggestion overseas research of copycat and cluster suicides was of little relevance to New Zealand and the restrictions of the Coroners Act made overseas research irrelevant. She said some of the best research and literature reviews on the links between media reporting and suicidal behaviour in vulnerable individuals were from Australia and, given the similarities between Australia and New Zealand, the research was “likely to be just as relevant here”.

The MOH subsequently met with CPU representatives and agreed to revise the guidelines after further consultation with media organisations. The booklet was subsequently re-named “a resource” rather than “guidelines” and incorporated more facts, useful contacts and information on suicide and suicide prevention.

### **3.3 The 1999 MOH guidelines**

In April 1999, the CPU’s honorary secretary Phil O’Reilly indicated he hoped the CPU would be able to show some support for the revised MOH guidelines once the CPU’s then Press Freedom Committee had discussed them. However, in May he informed the MOH that the CPU would not endorse the resource but would advise its members it had been involved in providing comments on the draft.

When the MOH released *Suicide and the Media: The reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media. A Resource*, in September 1999, it noted in a media release that a consultation draft had been forwarded to the CPU, television and radio media, journalism schools and other stakeholders.

### **3.4 The CPU’s current position**

As noted in 3.2, the CPU’s (New Zealand section) media freedom committee has maintained a consistent position regarding the reporting of suicide since 1997. The current chairperson Gavin Ellis, Editor-in-Chief of the *New Zealand Herald*, stresses that “all the research cited to date has been from environments where there are few if any restrictions on reporting of suicides” (Personal communication: 14 July 2004). He also cautions against accepting Australian studies unchallenged, for example that by Riaz Hassan (1995) reported in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry. “I believe the study involving suicide reports in [the] *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* used suicide rates throughout Australia ... The *SMH* and *The Age* circulate quite narrowly in the Sydney and Melbourne markets and are certainly not mass circulation national newspapers. They appeal among young people (or, more accurately, lack of appeal) is a further factor that does not seem to have figured in this study”. (Hassan (1995: 482) acknowledged suicide data for Sydney and Melbourne was not available.)

Ellis is “suspicious” of references to “anecdotal evidence” and, also echoing the CPU’s 1997 submission (3.2), he argues New Zealand media treat the subject of suicide with care. “I can think of no editor who would stoop to some of the things that apparently worry health officials. Who would publish a picture of the noose a teenager used to kill herself? Who would give minute details of the cocktail of pills that a young girl used to take her own life? To a person, editors here would act more responsibly than that. Frankly, I do not believe New Zealand media are the problem. Suicide, and youth suicide in particular, is a complex issue.” In relation to copycat and suicide clusters, Ellis believes research should examine the role of email and text messages and word-of-mouth within the cohort associated with a youth suicide victim.

The CPU’s position is most comprehensively detailed in a document prepared in 2001 with input from a senior executive at Television New Zealand and drawing on overseas guidelines for reporting suicide (Appendix 2). The suggested protocols were distributed to editors for discussion. Protocols are recommended because “While the New Zealand Ministry of Health has issued guidelines relating to the reporting of suicide, media organisations in New Zealand do not appear to have their own guidelines.” Former *Waikato Times* editor Venetia Sherson, who developed the protocols, said the MOH booklet “seemed like an edict” (Interview: 17 July 2004). A relaxation of the Coroners Act “to lift the veil of secrecy that currently exists” is endorsed. The underlying message is the need for media professionals to take a responsible approach to reporting suicide. Guidelines, says the document, “should not be prescriptive and should not prevent the media from reporting issues that, while sensitive, are still of public interest”. The public interest is not defined.

The protocols proposed were based on guidelines established in Australia and Britain, notably the Australian resource, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness – A Resource for Media Professionals* which is described as “probably the most useful resource on which to base a set of New Zealand guidelines”.

The protocols are:

“In relation to the reporting of suicide, representatives of New Zealand media accept the need to avoid the following:

- Reporting which might encourage copycat suicide or self-harm.
- Unnecessary reference to details of method or place of suicide.
- Language or presentation that trivialises, romanticises or glorifies suicide, particularly in papers that target young readers.
- Images that add to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased.

It is also recommended that, in relation, to suicide reporting, the media:

- Follow media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma when reporting personal tragedy.
- Encourage public understanding of the complexity of suicide.
- Include references to counselling services available to people in distress and their families and provide contact details.

Journalists are encouraged to adopt a responsible approach to the reporting of suicide and consult with reputable associations and individuals when seeking comment for articles on these issues.”

According to Ellis, the protocols were included in an ongoing series of advisories to all editors and have “no more status than that”. The media freedom committee recently discussed making the protocols available to electronic media executives.

### 3.5 The New Zealand Press Council (NZPC)

The New Zealand Press Council (NZPC) has taken a keen interest in the media’s coverage of suicide. Its 2001 report included a statement summarising the council’s view of the Coroners Act and the need for more openness in reporting suicide (NZPC 2001: 10). It said it agreed with calls to relax reporting restrictions on self-inflicted deaths, given the incidence of suicide in New Zealand, and referred to an earlier decision (758: B M Reynolds v *Southland Times*) in which it commented: “Blaming the messenger for causing or worsening the problem, whose basic causes must be sought elsewhere, fails to recognise the important and cleansing nature of the blaze of publicity being focused on the darker side of New Zealand life.” A greater openness, said the council, did not absolve editors of the responsibility of recognising that suicide is a complex phenomenon, usually with inter-linked causes, and with effects on many people (Ibid: 10).

The council also acknowledged the “trepidation” with which mental health professionals watched the expansion of media interest in suicide and their fears of a copycat effect. However, it observed that “New Zealand’s restrictive reporting regimes, set alongside the rise in suicides in recent years, would suggest the opposite” (NZPC 2001: 10). The statement on reporting suicide ended with an endorsement of the Canadian Suicide Information and Education Centre view, “Suicide affects all. Let’s talk about it” (Ibid: 11).

The NZPC has taken issue with research invoked by health professionals, who oppose more openness in reporting suicide because of the presumed ‘copycat effect’, notably in its decision in relation to five complaints against the Auckland University Students’ Association magazine, *Craccum*. The complaints were over an article concerning suicide and an accompanying opinion piece published in 2000. The NZPC first refers to the MOH’s 1999 resource, *Suicide and the Media*, and its citation of the Barraclough, Shepherd and Jennings (1977) paper, “Do newspaper reports of coroners’ inquests incite people to commit suicide?”. The MOH resource says (1999: 2): “A further report by Barraclough et al in 1977 showed a significant rise in male suicide in Portsmouth after newspaper reports of suicide.” The NZPC cites comments in the same paper which appear to significantly qualify such an unequivocal statement and quotes the paper’s conclusion: “Our findings cannot provide the evidence for banning suicide reports on the grounds that reports cause suicide; but they do suggest that this measure is worth further consideration.”

The NZPC also questions the significance attached to research by Riaz Hassan (1995), listed in the bibliography of *Suicide and the Media*. Hassan says in his discussion (1995: 482) that: “The results show that in Australia exposure to the print media is probably an important factor in elevating the incidence of male suicide. High impact suicide newspaper stories raise the suicide risk of vulnerable persons, although it is difficult to say precisely how this happens.” According to the NZPC, Professor Hassan was recorded as telling a 1996 Australian Press Council seminar on “The Reporting of Suicide, particularly youth suicide” that: “I think it is very difficult scientifically to say that suicide stories cause more suicides. The causal link is something that I don’t think anybody can really establish. I certainly can’t establish that and my research study is the most recent on the subject” (NZPC 2000: 36-37).

Much of the NZPC's own research on this subject has been done by Terry Snow, a representative of the magazine publishers. In November 2002, Snow wrote a commentary on the Australian resource, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*, for NZPC members. In it, he took issue with other research frequently quoted by mental health professionals (including *Suicide and the Media*) – the so-called Vienna subway suicides (Sonneck et al 1994). Snow contacted co-author Professor Elma Etzersdorfer because he was concerned at what appeared to be a significant literal error in the published paper. He suspected a reference to no “casual” link between suicides and newspaper reporting of them should have read no “causal” link which was the actual finding. In a letter dated 26 April 2000, Etzersdorfer said it should have read “causal” because the results had to be interpreted in terms of probability. The most probable explanation was that the media reports had led to an increase in subway suicides and the change in reports was responsible for the following dramatic decline of such suicides and suicide attempts. “There is a methodological problem, however, as you rarely get any information about suicide victims and whether they read a certain report prior to the suicide ... A causal relationship in the strict sense could only be proved if a person having attempted suicide is interviewed which is hardly [sic] to achieve. In our discussions with media colleagues we always stressed that we do not want to blame them and it is also necessary to stress that a media report never works as a single cause, but may add, if someone is in a suicidal crisis” (Personal communication to Terry Snow: 26 April 2000).

Snow also criticises a statement in the Australian resource (2002: 6) that “several studies have found that the number of attempted suicides increased following the broadcast of a television movie or episode of a popular soap depicting suicide”. He refers to an episode of the *EastEnders* in which the character Angie overdosed and to a case of paracetamol self-poisoning in an episode of *Casualty*. Snow cites researchers at the East Surrey Health Authority (1993) who found not only an increase in the admissions of women of all ages in the South-West Thames region during the same period as the *Casualty* programme (week ending January 9) but also an increase in the week ending December 5 and in the week including November 5 for two years running. For Snow, in the case of the *EastEnders*, there is a lack of reference to countervailing research.

It is not part of this research to assess the rigour or efficacy of the many studies about media coverage of suicide. However, the seriousness with which senior media professionals treat this subject and their commitment to the independent verification of research cited by mental health professionals should be abundantly clear. Their interpretation of their own inquiries is the basis of their criticism, even scepticism, of research cited to support a restrictive view of what the media should report. It is not a superficial response or a simple objection to limitations on the freedom of expression. And given the relatively small pool of senior industry figures in New Zealand it is not surprising certain views gain common currency.

Snow recommended the NZPC look to its Australian counterpart rather than the Australian resource, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*, for model guidelines. In July 2001, the Australian Press Council (APC) revised its reporting guidelines on suicide. It believes some suicides will be reported as a matter of public interest and does not advocate precise rules or guidelines. It calls on the Australian print media to continue exercising care and responsibility in reporting suicide and mental illness and emphasises the desirability of avoiding:

- adding to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased
- any reporting which might encourage copycat suicide or self-harm

- unnecessary reference to details of method or place of suicide
- language or presentation which trivialises, romanticises, or glorifies suicide, particularly in papers which target a youth readership
- loose or slang use of terms to describe various forms of mental illness, and the risk of stigmatising vulnerable people that may accompany such labels.

The council also recommends articles dealing with suicide include a reference to counselling services available to people in distress and their families, with contact details ([www.presscouncil.org.au](http://www.presscouncil.org.au)).

The APC's guidelines were clearly the prime source of inspiration for the CPU's proposed protocols for reporting suicide.

The NZPC also has strong views on the Coroners Act 1988. It describes the legislative constraints on reporting suicide as the "impenetrable thicket" of the Coroners Act 1988, especially section 29 which deals with the media reporting of suicides (NZPC 2002: 15). Adjudicating the complaint of Tony Booker against the *Manawatu Evening Standard* (NZPC case 855), the council said there were difficulties with section 29 "as to its precise meaning". It noted the decision in *Board of Trustees of Tuakau College v Television New Zealand Ltd* (HC Auckland, CP 96/96, 22 March 1996) "seemed to suggest section 29 might now need to be interpreted in the light of section 14 of the Bill of Rights 1990 on freedom of expression with the law in this somewhat confused state" (NZPC 2001: 75).

The NZPC has called for more freedom for the print media to write about suicide, rejecting suggestions this would trigger copycat deaths. The Press Council chairperson Sir John Jeffries, a former High Court judge, has argued that, given New Zealand's high suicide rate, the issue is of urgent public interest. The Booker decision observed "youth suicide is a major concern and this silent epidemic has grown under one of the world's toughest regimes about what can be reported publicly about suicide" (NZPC 2001: 73).

### **3.6 Television industry perspective**

The New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council (NZTBC) represents the non-competitive interests of the free-to-air television broadcasters – CanWest TVWorks, Television New Zealand and Prime Television New Zealand.

NZTBC executive officer Bruce Wallace said in an interview the council shares the same general issues as the CPU about reporting suicide. The Coroners Act was "antiquated" as society had changed significantly since 1988. He believed there was a greater acceptance by the public that they were entitled to know about issues such as suicide. A particular issue for broadcasters was the immediacy of news especially when a network crossed live to a reporter. The provisions of the Coroners Act made it difficult for a reporter at the scene when suicide was suspected.

TV3 chief of staff Justine Short felt "hamstrung" by the Coroners Act. She said the network resorted to the "code words" used by news organisations when a suicide was suspected, for example "Police say there are no suspicious circumstances" or "Police are not seeking anyone else in connection with the death". TV3 did not use the "S word", she said. Short was aware of the MOH booklet but it was not used "on a regular basis". Normal practice was to discuss the story with the producers and the network's lawyer if necessary. Generally, TV3 had "steered right away from suicide".

### 3.7 News executives' perspectives

Interviews with senior news executives produced a high degree of consensus and generally reflected the views expressed by industry groups such as the CPU. The MOH resource, *Suicide and the Media*, is not widely used. The editor of a provincial newspaper summed it up: "I never had cause to use them again after an initial look." The editor of a metropolitan daily said he was aware of it but did not refer to it at all. He suspected he had "internalised" some of it. Informal discussions with reporters at several news organisations confirmed the resource is not promoted or actively invoked. This is hardly surprising given the negative views about the booklet expressed by senior industry figures. *Sunday Star-Times* editor Donna Chisholm had a different slant. She was frustrated by the MOH guidelines and the way they "keep getting quoted at us", citing the paper's coverage of the Yellow Ribbon ambassador peer support programme. The *Sunday Star-Times* feature (4 July 2004: A12-A13) raised questions about suicide prevention programmes in schools. Chisholm said it was a legitimate issue to discuss but "we received so much flak from people quoting the guidelines", which she believes are being used "in a censoring way".

In contrast, the Coroners Act 1988 looms large in the minds of news executives. "We can never ignore it," said one editor. "We are always poring over it," said another. Two themes emerged. The Act should be relaxed – "weighted to openness" according to *The Press* editor Paul Thompson who believes the Act has a "chilling effect" between the time of death and an inquest; and secondly, coroners exercise their discretion on the release of details of specific cases differently and the relationship between media organisations and their local coroner varies significantly. Chisholm: "It is very coroner-specific if you get into trouble or not." She cited an approach to a coroner for permission to write about a well-known person who had jumped from a building. The family was happy for a story but the coroner refused on the grounds it might pre-empt his decision. Ellis believes there should be more consistency of approach between coroners. "The exercise of discretion is based solely on the personal view of the coroner."

The prevailing practice is to use "code phrases" ("Police say there are no suspicious circumstances" or "Police are not seeking anyone else in connection with the death") when there is reasonable cause to believe a death was self-inflicted, to comply with the Act. However, *The Press* reported on 27 July that the sudden death of a Canterbury man embroiled in major horse doping and gambling inquires "will be referred to the Coroner as a suspected suicide". Other editors said they would not use that phrase because of section 29.

Chisholm said the *Sunday Star-Times* was prosecuted for an alleged breach of the Act after it ran stories about the death of a Mt Eden Prison inmate in 2003. In the first story, mindful of the Act, it reported the inmate had been found dead in his cell. The focus of the story was whether someone who was mentally ill should have been in jail. The follow-up, which had a senior mental health official commenting the man should not have been in jail, noted the man had hanged himself. Chisholm said the paper was not convicted because of a legal technicality. At the inquest, reference was made to window latches that made hanging points. The *Sunday Star-Times* did not report the inquest finding in detail to avoid indicating how the man died.

News executives stressed New Zealand media organisations would act responsibly if the rules on reporting suicide were relaxed and would approach each case on its merits. *Timaru Herald* editor Dave Wood: "You can't take a common view on it. There are suicides that have 'real news and educational value' and others where no coverage is warranted. If you lifted the lid on suicide reporting totally what would it

achieve apart from extra grief for families?” Wood said news organisations could help themselves by taking a responsible approach. Chisholm said: “We are not generally interested in suicide unless it is part of a wider picture.” Ellis spoke of a “misconception” the media would approach suicide cases in “some sort of prurient and gratuitous way” and called for a presumption of disclosure unless there were compelling reasons to the contrary.

As to what could make a suicide newsworthy, the news executives were generally in agreement:

- if it involved a public figure
- if there had been a cluster of suicides or indications of a trend
- if the suicide occurred in a public place and caused disruption
- if the deceased was in prison or police custody
- if the public was being informed on important issues such as suicide prevention
- if it would end rumour and speculation.

The manner of death was not generally seen as an essential element. Former *Waikato Times* editor Venetia Sherson believed reporting the method of suicide was usually “not helpful”. For Dave Wood, the effect of the death was the news not the method. The editor of *Metro*, Nicola Legat, thought the magazine probably would allude to the method. However, if it did publish a feature where suicide was an aspect, the family would have to be: “okay with it. We would never do it unless the family agreed. We couldn't go and cause pain to a family. That would be inhumane.” In the case of youth suicides where the aim of the story was educative, parents would have to “buy-in” and might not be named, according to Wood. The *Sunday Star-Times*'s Donna Chisholm believes there should be more latitude for families who want to make a point. “If a family was absolutely opposed to any sort of coverage, very rarely would that be over-ridden.”

It was acknowledged not all media would act responsibly, especially in an intensely competitive environment, but self-regulation was preferable to regulation and there were media watchdogs – the NZPC and Broadcasting Standards Authority. One editor said it should be left to the community to judge. Public disapproval was a significant restraint. Paul Thompson said some irresponsible reporting was “the price you pay for an open society and free media” but most journalists were responsible.

### **3.8 Media codes of practice**

New Zealand codes of practice do not deal specifically with suicide unlike the BBC *Producers' Guidelines* which offer some advice under the broad heading of “Imitative and Anti-Social Behaviour” (2004: 101). Suicide is seen as a legitimate subject for news reporting but there is a caution that the factual reporting of suicides may encourage others. The BBC says reports should: “avoid glamorising the story, providing simplistic explanations, or imposing on the grief of those affected. They should also usually avoid graphic or technical details of a suicide method, particularly when the method is unusual.” The sensitive use of language is stressed and it is noted the term ‘commit suicide’ is considered offensive by some people. Because of the “profound effect” programmes, both factual and dramatic, that feature suicide can have on the audience, providing a helpline and other support material is recommended.

The NZPC's statement of principles has a section on privacy which states: "Those suffering from trauma or grief call for special consideration, and when approached, or enquiries are being undertaken, careful attention is to be given to their sensibilities." The section on photographs states: "Those involving situations of grief and shock are to be handled with special consideration for the sensibilities of those affected."

The code of the journalists' union, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, simply states that its members "shall respect private grief and personal privacy and shall have the right to resist compulsion to intrude upon them".

The codes of practice of free-to-air television broadcasters approved by the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) have several clauses that could be invoked for suicide reporting. In 1996, when a health psychologist complained about an *Assignment* current affairs programme that dealt with youth suicide, he cited clauses G1 (To be truthful and accurate on points of fact), G9 (To take care in depicting items which explain the technique of a crime in a manner which invites imitation) and G12 (To be mindful of the effect any programme may have on children during their normally accepted viewing times).

### **3.9 Journalism training resources**

Media law courses at New Zealand's tertiary journalism institutions include discussion of the Coroners Act and the limitations on reporting suicide in court reporting. The ethical issues that arise from reporting suicide would be usually discussed in the context of privacy, especially for the victims and their families, and methods of reporting. Each institution approaches these matters in its own way and there is nothing comparable to *Response Ability*, the Australian resource on mental illness and suicide in the media, which includes dramatised hypothetical case studies on CD and video.

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Implementation of *Suicide and the Media*

Media professionals in New Zealand believe strongly in the freedom of expression and self-regulation. They will always prefer to formulate their own guidelines and will opt for broad principles that leave plenty of scope for their application rather than something prescriptive. The codes adopted by the journalists' union, the NZPC and INL before it was sold to Fairfax, exemplify this approach. Support for more openness in the Coroners Court and the Family Court also reflect a general dislike on restrictions on news gathering. Thus, guidelines developed by outside agencies, such as the MOH, will inevitably encounter resistance, especially if they are seen to be imposed without adequate consultation and/or are unduly prescriptive. Unfortunately for the MOH, the manner in which the 1998 guidelines *Preventing Suicide* were prepared and released upset the news industry and this had an impact on the industry's reaction to the revised resource released in 1999. In keeping with its commitment to self-regulation, the CPU has distributed suggested protocols for reporting suicide and this approach can be expected to appeal to its members.

Apart from a general resistance to perceived threats to the freedom of expression, the news industry does not accept research linking reported suicides and copycat deaths is conclusive. This is not peculiar to New Zealand. The Australian Press Council's submission on the second edition of the media resource kit on suicide reporting reported the views of journalists convened as a focus group: "These journalists do not subscribe to the assumption that the reporting of suicide, particularly youth suicide, is ipso facto bad and could itself be a causative factor in subsequent suicides" (APC 2000:1). As noted in 3.5, senior industry people have invested considerable time independently researching the literature on suicide reporting and they have had a great influence on the position taken by industry bodies such as the CPU and NZPC. Their views cannot be taken lightly.

Media professionals advance the public interest as a strong justification for reporting suicide-related matters. The APC focus group expressed a view reflected in the CPU's proposed protocols: "The council, believing that freedom of the press is the freedom of the public to be informed, says that the media have a responsibility appropriately to inform the public on important issues such as suicide prevention, treatment of mental illness, causes of depression, lack of government funding etc. All of this entails some reporting of suicide-related issues" (APC 2000: 1). In his commentary on the Australian resource, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*, the NZPC's Terry Snow told his colleagues: "I believe the Press Council needs to reinforce the press's continuing need to report on suicide and mental health problems as a matter of compelling public interest in the first instance, while acknowledging there is a responsible way to do this" (Snow 2002).

Industry people stress their commitment to responsible reporting in advocating their right to develop their own guidelines. The CPU's 1997 submission discussed in 3.2 asserted that, when issues related to youth suicide were reported, it was done responsibly especially in New Zealand newspapers. Three years later Snow (2000) told the NZPC there needed to be more coverage of suicide not less, and in a dramatic way if necessary. Suicide by the young was an appalling problem that needed constant exposure and underlining, not concealment. "And, yes, it needs to be as responsible as the law and social standards require, but less perfectly

controlled than the mental health guidelines want. Human interest will always triumph over institutional rules.”

The MOH's *Suicide and the Media* is not promoted by news executives as an important resource for journalists to consult. Interviews suggest the content regarded as most valuable is in Part 2: Facts about Suicide and Part 3: Practical Advice, Contacts and Resources. However, an editorial in the *Daily News* on 27 March 2004 commenting on this research project predicted the authors would be “likely to unearth a lot of dissatisfaction”. Referring to advice in Part 3, the *Daily News* said this had “inhibited the media’s ability to describe the anguish felt by the family and friends of suicide victims”.

In this climate, we see little evidence the 1999 guidelines have been implemented by New Zealand media organisations and strongly doubt another version developed by the MOH and mental health professionals would fare much better.

## 4.2 Recommendations

The key recommendations are:

1. Mental health professionals should initiate a continuing dialogue with key industry stakeholders based on mutual respect for each other’s views. A symposium on suicide and the media convened in a spirit of genuine consultation would be a useful starting point. Following that, mental health professionals should develop relationships with industry bodies such as the Newspaper Publishers Association, the New Zealand Press Council, the New Zealand Television Broadcasters’ Council, the Radio Broadcasters’ Association, the Magazine Publishers Association, the Commonwealth Press Union New Zealand Section and the Broadcasting Standards Authority.
2. Rather than modifying *Suicide and the Media*, the MOH should consider working with the industry to develop protocols (as proposed by the CPU) that would be ‘owned’ by the industry as a basis for effective self-regulation. Such protocols or guidelines could be incorporated in the codes of practice approved by the Broadcasting Standards Authority and in the statement of principles of the New Zealand Press Council, the two media watchdogs in New Zealand. They could then consider complaints arising from alleged breaches of the codes or the statement of principles.
3. A training kit for journalism schools modelled on the Australian resource, *Response Ability*, should be developed in a New Zealand context and made freely available. The Australian kit’s combination of a video, CDs, printed materials and a website was prepared by mental health professionals and journalism educators. The support of New Zealand journalism educators for curriculum material of this kind should be sought as a top priority.
4. The training kit should also be offered to the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation for its professional training seminars.

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## 6. APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE MEDIA AND SUICIDE

### 6.1 Introduction

Researchers have traced concern about the imitative effects of suicide to Europe as far back as the eighteenth century (see, for example, Phillips 1974; Goldney 2001; Frei et al 2003). By the nineteenth century, medical practitioners' opposition to the publication of suicide stories in the United States press, due to their perceived imitative effects, was reportedly widespread (Leonard 2001). However, it was not until the twentieth century that the first systematic scientific investigations into copycat suicide were done, beginning with the work of David Phillips in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Since then, more than 40 scientific papers have been published on the impact of suicide stories in the media (Stack 2000: 954; Stack 2003: 238).

Scholarly interest in the media and suicide has been almost entirely devoted to the question of impact. The majority of research has focused on the impact of suicide stories on subsequent acts of suicide, called "contagion" or "imitation". The leading theme in these studies is the publicising of "model" suicides in the mass media may lead a distressed individual to suicide (Phillips et al 1992: 499; Weimann and Fishman 1995: 551). This phenomenon was first referred to as "the Werther Effect" by Phillips (1974) after Goethe's fictional hero, whose suicide was believed to have triggered many imitative acts (Goldney 1989: 31; Sonneck et al 1994; Jamieson et al 2003: 1643; Gould et al 2003: 1270).

### 6.2 Risk factors involved in media coverage of suicide

Media influences are often seen as environmental and contextual "risk factors" for suicide and attempted suicide, where media publicity about suicide issues, whether in the form of fiction, documentary or news reports, may provoke suicidal behaviour among individuals vulnerable to such behaviour (Beautrais 2000: 427). The frequency with which media stories are associated with apparent, and otherwise unexplained, transitory increases in suicide rates appears to support the hypothesis that publicity about suicide may have an unanticipated effect among vulnerable individuals who may model their behaviour upon the accounts of suicide presented by the print media and television (Beautrais 2000: 427). The reporting (and especially irresponsible or over-reporting) of suicide-related issues and fictitious suicidal modelling behaviour may also 'normalise' the concept among the population. Taboos previously surrounding suicide may be lessened and suicide may thus become more widely perceived as a common and understandable option as a problem-solving strategy in a stress situation (Schmidtke and Häfner 1989: 324; Beautrais 2000: 427).

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<sup>1</sup> Although Phillips (1974) is widely regarded as the first systematic and comprehensive investigation of the relationship between mass media reports on suicide and actual suicide, Motto's (1967; 1970) reports are said to be the first contemporary inquires into the effects of media reporting on suicide (Goldney 1989: 30), albeit in an indirect way. Beginning with the opposite question to later works – the effects on "non-reporting" – Motto's 1967 work investigated whether a prolonged newspaper blackout gave rise to lower suicide rates in seven United States cities and found that, although there was a reduction of suicide in five of the cities from which data was extracted, this was not statistically significant. The 1970 study of a 1967 newspaper blackout in Detroit suggested there was a significant lowering of the suicide rate in the female population, especially in the age group under 35 years.

### **6.3 Explanations for the “copycat effect”**

Various media theories can be used to evaluate the impact of the mass media on social behaviour generally. McLuhan’s “agenda-setting” hypothesis holds that the mass media do not determine what is thought, but by assigning a certain degree of status to specific themes, they determine what subjects are thought about. The “uses and gratification approach” and the “information-seeking approach” assume a recipient selects information that gives cognitive or affective benefits or reinforcements so there is agreement between their needs and the content of media reports (Schmidtke and Häfner 1989: 321-322). In addition to media theories, perspectives from psychology have informed research on imitative suicide.

Based on theoretical explanations such as social learning, contagion, imitation, and suggestion, several researchers have tried to explore the Werther Effect (Weimann and Fishman 1995: 551). Explanations of media impacts on suicide have generally been framed in terms of the social learning theory. According to this, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling (Gould et al 2003: 1269). Concerning the relationship between publicised and actual suicidal behaviour, it is assumed one learns there are troubled people who solve their life’s problems (eg divorce, terminal illness, dishonour) through suicide. Mentally troubled persons may simply copy the behaviour of the troubled persons in the suicide stories (Stack 2003: 238; Platt 1989: 347).

A more complex set of explanations revolves around the learning process of differential identification. This theory grew out of criticisms of research that neglected the social context of victims and out of the belief that, in addition to a wide range of motives for suicide, differences in the life situation of the victim, and characteristics such as nationality, race, and gender, may influence the effect of a suicide story (Stack 1990). The central premise of the differential identification perspective is that the suicidal audience will tend to identify with, and hence model, the suicidal behaviour of victims whose life situation is similar to their own (Stack 1990: 554).

A third, albeit less studied, set of explanations moves the focus from the story characteristics to the audience’s mood, arguing that stories that appear when suicidogenic conditions are high (eg high unemployment, and high divorce rates) have more of a copycat effect (Stack 2003: 238; Stack 1996: 133).

### **6.4 Objectives and scope of literature review**

Stack (2000) suggests the purpose of literature reviews is to assess and synthesise either a set of studies, a representative sample of studies, or an exhaustive compilation of studies; the features of which are described, or evaluated through largely qualitative techniques. The purpose of this literature review was to provide a background for an investigation into media attitudes toward *Suicide and the Media*, a resource developed in 1999 to help media organisations cover suicide by the New Zealand Ministry of Health as part of the New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy.

This literature review does not represent a comprehensive review of all relevant primary research dealing with the effect of the mass media on suicidal behaviour. Rather, this literature review presents a selective overview of what appear to be representative works in the field, summarising major research findings. Although some central methodological weaknesses are incorporated, an in-depth assessment

of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the research overviewed is beyond the scope of this review.<sup>2</sup>

Because this literature review is concerned primarily with the mass media's effects, it focuses on research addressing the impact of suicide stories published or broadcast in the mass media in the manner of Phillips et al (1992). It does not review a smaller body of related research on suicide "epidemics" and time-space clustering that explore possible influences on suicidal behaviours beyond the mass media.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this approach to the study of suicide modelling can be found in Gould et al (1994), Gould et al (1990) and Mercy et al (2001).

In addition to research that explores the mass media's "effects" on suicidal behaviour, this review also outlines research addressing the content of mass media reporting on suicide that does not include suicide or attempted suicide as a dependent variable. Works of this type have typically employed content analysis of newspaper reports as their primary mode of analysis.

## **6.5 Classifying the studies**

Following Pirkis and Blood (2001a), this overview of research addressing the effects of the mass media on suicidal behaviour uses the following study design classifications.

### *Descriptive studies*

These are defined by Pirkis and Blood (2001a: 4) as detailed studies of individual cases or group of individuals with no comparator.

### *Analytical studies*

These are defined by Pirkis and Blood (2001a: 4) as studies of groups or individuals where a comparison was made with another group. These studies are further divided into two subtypes:

#### a) Ecological studies

Pirkis and Blood (2001a: 4) define ecological studies as those in which the outcome variable (usually suicide rates) for one group is compared with that for another group. The groups are usually differentiated by location, or by time. A key characteristic of ecological studies is that the data is analysed at the aggregate level, rather than at the individual level. Ecological studies focus on the short-term impact of media exposure on suicide. They have shown

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<sup>2</sup> A more in-depth assessment of many of the works summarised here can be found in Pirkis and Blood (2001a).

<sup>3</sup> The term "suicide clusters" refers to an "outbreak" or an excessive number of suicides occurring in close temporal and geographic proximity. Anecdotal observations of suicide clusters suggest that suicide victims in these clusters often know one another or that victims would have had knowledge of other suicides in the cluster through their social networks (see Mercy, Kresnow and O'Carroll et al 2001: 120; Gould and Kramer 2001: 10). Joiner (1999) usefully distinguishes between "point clusters" and "mass clusters". The former refer to local phenomena and involve victims who are relatively contiguous in both space and time. Mass clusters are media-related phenomenon grouped more in time than in space, purportedly in response to the publicising of actual or fictional suicides.

evidence of an imitative effect resulting from the publicising of real or fictional accounts in the mass media, although several studies have found evidence that contradicts these findings (Mercy, Kresnow and O'Carroll et al 2001: 120-121).

#### b) Individual-level studies

Pirkis and Blood (2001a: 4) classify studies in which the outcome variable for individuals in one group is compared with that for individuals in another group as "individual-level studies". Typically, the outcome variable is a self-reported attitude towards suicide or the likelihood of suicidal behaviour. A key characteristic of individual-level studies is that the data is analysed at an individual level. This is possible because the exposure status and the outcome of each individual are known. Gould, Jamieson and Romer (2003: 1273) add to this characterisation of individual-level studies noting that, in contrast to the ecological designs that use death certificate data to study differential community suicide rates, these newer explanations include experimental designs that examine individuals' reactions to media dramatisations or written vignettes about suicide.

#### *Content-analytic studies*

Another alternative research strategy can be found in content-analytic studies. Typically, such studies assess the specific display and content characteristics of media stories (Gould et al 2003: 1273). Traditionally, content-analytic studies have differed from ecological and individual-level studies in that they have tended not to examine the effects of media reporting on suicide but have confined themselves to the analysis of the nature and form of media reports on suicide (eg Fekete et al 2001; Coyle and MacWhannell 2002). However, recent studies using the content-analytic design have directly assessed suicide attempters following media displays (eg Hawton et al 1999) and, for this reason, studies using this design are discussed in this literature review of research examining the effects of media reporting on suicide.

### **6.6 Literature review**

Most research investigating the relationship between mass media reports or portrayals of suicide and actual suicide has concentrated on two media forms – newspapers and television – and generally falls into what is known as the 'effects tradition' of media research. This approach asks what effect (usually considered as a change in knowledge, attitudes or behaviour) mass media content has on audiences or segments of audiences (Pirkis and Blood 2001a: 17).

In such studies, media content is the independent variable, and the "effect" (knowledge, attitude or behaviour) is the dependent variable. Following Pirkis and Blood (2001a; 2001b), this review classifies studies firstly by media type (including newspapers, television, music, and mixed media). Secondly, studies are reviewed by content (general, non-fiction and fiction) and thirdly by study type (descriptive studies and analytical studies, with the latter sub-classified into ecological studies; individual-level studies and content analysis).

#### *Newspapers – non-fiction – ecological*

Phillips' (1974; 1977) works were among the first ecological studies of newspaper reports on suicide. In these studies, front-page reports of suicides in English and American newspapers were measured against completed suicides. They found the greater the amount of coverage of a suicide, the greater copycat effect it had. This was particularly apparent in the geographical region in which the publication was available. Phillips' work was highly influential among later studies which adopted the

ecological approach to analysing the relationship between newspaper reporting on suicide and actual suicides.

In the ecological tradition of Phillips (1974; 1977), Wasserman (1984) examined the relationship between the appearance of front-page newspaper stories in the United States' national press on celebrity and non-celebrity suicides between 1947 and 1974. However, Wasserman's findings challenged those of Phillips (1974; 1977). Although there appeared to be a significant increase in suicides in months in which front-page articles on celebrity suicides had occurred, Wasserman concluded there was no direct relationship between newspaper coverage of suicides and actual suicides when variables such as economic cycles, seasonal effects, and the influence of war were taken into account.

Replicating Wasserman (1984), Stack (1987) used time-series regression techniques to analyse the relationship between newspaper reports of celebrity suicides and actual suicide rates. Stack compared the national suicide rates in the months between 1948 and 1980 to those in which front-page celebrity suicides had been published in the national press, and to those in which no such report had appeared. He found a positive correlation between media reports and suicide rate. Stack found the greater the coverage given to celebrity suicides, the greater the imitative effect. This was particularly so if the subject of the story was an entertainment or political celebrity. This challenged the findings of Wasserman (1984) which were seen as flawed because they were based on a sample of less than 50% of the relevant suicide stories.

Gundlach and Stack (1990) showed that, under certain conditions, there was a positive correlation between non-celebrity suicides and actual suicides. They began with the assumption previous ecological research was flawed due to its reliance on limited national media coverage of suicide, often being based on less than one story per year. Seeking to provide an analysis of the effects of a more concentrated media coverage, Gundlach and Stack (1990) analysed the relationship between "hyper" (or spectacular) coverage of front-page suicides in the *New York Times* between 1913 and 1914. This study showed there was a non-linear relationship between the coverage of suicide and actual suicide, suggesting that if non-celebrity suicides receive enough publicity they can have a significant impact on suicide rates.

This finding was explored further by Stack (1990) who tested a "differential identification" hypothesis – whether the publication of suicide stories in which the victim had experienced marital problems including divorce had more of an effect on persons with similar life situations. Stack's study found that stories involving a celebrity victim with marital problems were significantly associated with increases in the monthly suicide rate.

During the 1990s, ecological research employing newspaper reports on suicide as the independent variable and social behaviour as the dependent variable has also been done outside the United States. Stack (1996) explored the Werther Effect on suicide data derived from Japan over a 30-year period between 1955 and 1985. Monthly suicide data was examined in the context of stories of Japanese celebrity and non-celebrity suicides published in the front three pages of the *Japan Times*. This research appeared to support the media-suicide linkage by showing the publicised suicide of a Japanese person was associated with an increase in suicides during the month of the story.

Further research on the media-suicide relationship outside the United States was done by Sonneck, Etzersdorfer and Nagel-Keuss (1994) and Etzersdorfer and

Sonneck (1998). These studies analysed Austrian suicide cases between 1984 and 1987 in connection with subway suicide, testing a hypothesis that dramatic reports on subway suicides in Austrian newspapers were connected to the increase in subway suicides and attempted suicides. This research found that, from 1984 until mid-1987, there was a significant increase in suicide attempts and completed suicides. However, from mid-1987, following the introduction of media guidelines, suicide reports changed markedly and the number of attempted and completed suicides dropped more than 80% from the first to the second half of 1987. The findings suggested an association between the implementation of the guidelines and a decline in the suicide rate. However, Etzersdorfer has since acknowledged a methodological problem with the research, and the results must be interpreted in terms of probability.

Hassan (1995) documents the first ecological study to be done in Australia on the relationship between newspaper reporting on suicide and actual suicide. Considering not only the relationship between suicide reports and actual suicides, but also the nature and extent of the reporting, this study used a scoring system based on story size, position and content, and identified "high impact" suicide stories published in two major metropolitan newspapers; the *Melbourne Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Hassan identified "high impact" periods for imitative effects (the day of publication and the subsequent two days) and "low impact" periods (periods of three months, 14 days before and 14 days after suicide stories) between 1981 and 1990. The findings suggested the national daily average suicide rate for males increased significantly during high impact periods, but not for females. Hassan has since said he could not establish a causal link.

Barraclough, Sheppherd and Jennings' (1977) study used individual suicides as their starting point, rather than stories on suicide. This research examined a sample of Portsmouth residents who died by suicide between January 1970 and December 1972. It hypothesised that, if newspaper reports incite suicidal behaviour, suicide reports ought to occur more frequently in the few days before a suicide. The study examined the temporal association between newspaper reports of suicide inquests in *The News* and the occurrence of suicide in Portsmouth over a three-year period. From this they calculated the likelihood of a day on which a suicide occurred being preceded by a newspaper report of suicide and compared this with the likelihood of a day on which no suicide occurred being preceded by a newspaper report. They found a statistical association between reports of suicide inquests and the suicide of men under 45 years of age.

It is important to note, however, that a statistical association does not establish a causal relationship between media reports of suicides and actual suicides. As the authors acknowledged, an essential element in a causal link between report and suicide is the suicide victim having read the newspaper report. This would require interviews with the families of suicide victims, and with suicide attempters, which the study did not undertake (Barraclough, Sheppherd and Jennings 1977: 531). As noted above, this failure to describe the extent or nature of the exposure to the media reporting is characteristic of much of the research that has used the ecological design. Because the ecological studies fail to clarify the timing of media reports relative to the increased numbers of suicide, their findings are open to alternative explanations, such as the reporting being a result of, rather than a cause of, the increased suicide numbers (Pirkis and Blood 2001a: 66).

### *Newspapers – non-fiction – analytical: individual-level studies*

Individual-level studies have explored the influence of newspaper reports on suicide upon suicidal tendencies. In such studies, a group of subjects are typically presented with a hypothetical newspaper article describing an individual's suicide. The subjects are then asked about their own attitudes about the likelihood of committing such an act themselves. Often, subjects are asked to consider their responses to varied circumstances surrounding the person's suicide. Representative of such studies is the work of Higgins and Range (1996). In this study, a newspaper report of the suicide of a 16-year-old called Pat was presented to 306 university students who were asked to state the likelihood of imitative behaviour based on varied circumstances surrounding Pat's death. These circumstances included parents' impending divorce, a recently-ended relationship, a history of alcohol abuse, a history of psychiatric disturbance, being an honours student, a university athlete, or no conditions described. Also typical of works of this type, Higgins and Range's (1996) study found that few subjects indicated they would imitate the suicide irrespective of the circumstances with which they were presented.

### *Newspapers – non-fiction – descriptive studies*

Descriptive studies (research into individual cases or groups of individuals with no comparator) using non-fiction newspaper content have been significantly less popular than the ecological and individual-level studies. One such anecdotal report was that of Hills (1995) who reported a psychiatric patient threatening to jump out of a multi-story building after an Australian newspaper produced a front-page article and picture depicting a person undertaking this act. However, it is generally recognised that case studies and case series have weaker designs than ecological studies and individual-level studies, since the former are descriptive only and involve few or no comparisons (Pirkis and Blood 2001a: 17).

### *Newspapers – non-fiction – content analysis*

Unlike the studies reviewed above, which have been primarily concerned with determining a media-suicide linkage, content-analytic studies investigate the nature and extent of media portrayals of suicidal behaviour for its own sake. In other words, real suicide does not typically feature as the dependent variable in such work, although studies have recently combined content-analytic and ecological designs. Often, the role of media guidelines on reporting suicide is assessed in these latter types of studies. For example, Jamieson, Hall-Jamieson and Romer (2003) undertook a content analysis of the *New York Times* for 1990, 1995, and 1999 to determine how suicide was covered and whether the implementation of reporting guidelines in 1994 had any notable effect. They found that, although the suicide rate did not increase during this period, the prominence of suicide reports did, suggesting the 1994 guidelines had little impact upon the newspaper's reporting of suicide.

Similarly, Weimann and Fishman (1995) analysed suicide stories in the two leading Israeli newspapers between 1955 and 1990, comparing these stories with official statistics documenting the number of actual suicides during this period. This study found that, while suicide in Israel remained relatively stable in terms of relative frequency, the press coverage changed in terms of increased reporting, space and prominence. This confirmed the need for studies that explore the presentation and reconstruction of suicide stories in the media.

Other studies have used a combination of content analysis and descriptive study designs. Coyle and MacWhannell (2002) began from the assumption the social construction of newspaper reports on suicide has important implications for how

suicide is understood and responded to. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, Coyle and MacWhannell analysed reports in four Scottish newspapers (two broadsheets; two tabloids) over a one-year period. Stories were quantified into pre-determined categories (sex, age, celebrity status, methods and motives) and examined qualifiedly using grounded theory to explore the way meaning was constructed. This study identified five key themes of suicide reports, which the authors characterised as dramatising, locating, social impacting, causal searching and moral labelling; concepts which highlight how dominant values and discourses on suicide, illness, and death are mediated and represented in Scottish newspapers.

Other studies have focused solely on content analysis. For example, Frey, Michel and Valach's (1997) study investigated the "potential imitative effect" and the extent of preventative messages in Swiss newspaper reports covering suicide. They used a rating scheme to measure for a potential imitation effect based on heading, text and picture. The study showed that approximately two-fifths of all 151 articles were inappropriate in some aspects and were considered as having a high potential for imitation effect. The main tabloid newspaper rated more unfavourably than the other newspapers studied. Relevant preventative information was given in only 10% of the articles, suggesting media guidelines for suicide reporting were needed.

#### *Film and television – non-fiction – analytical: ecological*

A number of US studies have explored the relationship between the television coverage of suicide and actual suicide rates. Phillips and Carstensen (1986) investigated the fluctuation of the suicide rate among American teenagers before and after the screening of suicide stories on network television evening news programmes between 1973 and 1979. Using a regression analysis that controlled for day of the week, the month, holidays and yearly trends, the study found a significant increase in teenage suicides (especially among females) in the week following a broadcast irrespective of whether the suicide story was about the suicide of an individual or whether it was a general information or feature item.

Kessler et al (1988; 1989) also examined the association between network television news stories and subsequent US suicides using daily time-series data from 1973 to 1984. Drawing on earlier research into the construction of summary measures (sub-groups) of news stories, the researchers also assigned a variable to control for the level of exposure to broadcasts about suicide on a given day. Although the study found the number of suicides increased as a function of news stories about suicide from 1973 to 1980, this was not the case between 1981 and 1984. This finding suggested the association between network television news stories about suicide and subsequent changes in the total US suicide rate was weaker and less consistent than earlier reports claimed.

#### *Film and television – fiction – analytical: ecological*

Berman (1988) replicated Gould and Shaffer's (1986) study investigating the relationship between adolescent suicide statistics and the broadcast of television movies dealing with suicide. Using a nation-wide sample of suicide cases, the study examined the imitative effects of fictional portrayals of suicide. Considering the total number of US suicides, the number of adolescent suicides, and adolescent suicides as a proportion of total suicides following the broadcast of three films dealing with suicide, the research found no evidence for an overall increase in teenage suicides following the broadcasts, although there was some evidence of method-specific effects.

Platt's (1987, 1989) study was done in the United Kingdom and investigated the behavioural impact of a fictional parasuicide, using an episode of the British soap opera *EastEnders* in which an overdose was shown. The study compared the number of cases of deliberate overdose treated in accident and emergency departments across the United Kingdom in the week following the episode (the experimental period) to the number treated in the week before the episode (the control period), adjusting for trends in the previous year (1985). No significant overall effect was found and Platt reported his findings "do not lend support to the claim that there was a strong imitation effect after this televised parasuicide" (1987).

Similar research into the impact of fictitious television portrayals of suicide on attempted suicide was done by Simkin and colleagues in 1995 and 1999. Simkin, Hawton and Whitehead et al (1995) and Hawton, Simkin and Deeks et al (1999) documented research into changes in the number of overdoses and the use of paracetamol in the three-week period before and after two broadcasts of *Casualty* which showed a teenager's overdose of paracetamol. The research found that, although the raw data suggested an increase in suicide attempts, an analysis of the data from the previous two years showed there was no evidence of any statistically significant effects attributable to the two broadcasts.

#### *Film and television – fiction – analytical: individual-level*

Steede and Range's (1989) study investigated the impact of a fictitious video recording on suicide ideation among American teenagers. A sample of 116 high school students was asked to watch a video-recorded scenario showing a distressed high school student and to imagine themselves in her position. Participants were given an 'information sheet' that summarised the information depicted in the video recording. Some sheets contained information that two of the girl's friends had recently committed suicide; some that two of her friends had recently died in an aeroplane accident; and others had no such additional details. Participants were asked to rate the likelihood of engaging in various behavioural alternatives (including suicide), to rate the contributing factors to the predicaments shown, and to complete a "Reasons for Living Scale" measuring reasons against suicide. Responses were analysed using one-way univariate analyses. The results suggested teenagers were unlikely to commit suicide. Most of the students in the sample advocated the same reasons for living irrespective of what 'background information' they had received.

These findings indicated that the knowledge of a previous suicide alone may not significantly influence subsequent suicidal behaviour among adolescents and that other factors such as media exposure, the reaction of peers and officials, and the social standing of the individual who originally died by suicide may be more important variables.

#### *Music – analytical: ecological*

Stack, Gundlach and Reeves (1994) investigated the impact of the heavy metal subculture on youth suicide rates across the 50 American States. Using data from subscriptions to heavy metal magazines, the study investigated the relationship between the magnitude of subscriptions and suicide rates in a multivariate analysis that controlled for a range of other predictors of suicide (including divorce and poverty). The study found the greater the strength of the heavy metal subculture, the greater the youth suicide rate. The authors concluded that heavy metal fans were significantly more likely to view suicide acceptable than non-fans, although this effect was mediated by religiosity. They found the themes of alienation and despair that characterise the lyrics of heavy metal reflect suicidogenic conditions already present

in its audience. Thus, the lyrics themselves are not the immediate cause of social behaviour, but their audience is likely to be a moderate/high risk for suicide.

#### *Music – analytical: individual-level*

Martin, Clarke and Pearce (1993) investigated the relationship between music preferences and suicidal thought among Australian students. The study used a self-report questionnaire that was given to 138 male and 109 female students to get information on music preferences, suicidal tendencies and risk-taking behaviours. The study found significant associations between a preference for rock/metal music (as opposed to pop music) and suicidal thoughts, acts of deliberate self-harm, depression, delinquency, drug taking and family dysfunction, particularly for female respondents.

#### *Internet – content analysis*

A significantly smaller body of research exists on the internet as a mass medium of potential influence on suicidal behaviour. One such study was undertaken by Baume, Rolfe and Clinton (1998), who used content-analytic methods to examine a sample of internet sites on the world wide web relating to suicide. Websites were classified into three major types: (a) entertainment and alternative culture sites; (b) crisis, education and research resources; and (c) newsgroups and mailing lists. The authors considered the potential effects (both positive and negative) of such sites. They concluded that responsible sites may have a positive, educational or supportive impact on their users. Less responsible sites (such as news group sites) may have a negative impact, encouraging the individual to go through with the act for fear of losing face among other members. While internet access to material relating to suicide may be potentially harmful for socially isolated, alienated, and otherwise vulnerable people, it is not possible to specify the impact of the internet on suicidal behaviour without empirical research.

#### *Mixed media*

Pirkis et al (2002) documented the Australian media monitoring project's study of newspaper, television and radio items on suicide over a 12-month period. Using descriptive and content-analytic methodologies, the study extracted descriptive information from media items on suicide with 10% rated for quality using a rating scale ranging from 0 (poor quality) to 100 (good quality). The research found media reporting on suicide was extensive in Australia, although the nature of reporting was highly variable in terms of focus and content. The majority of items did not use examples of inappropriate language, were appropriately located, did not use the word "suicide" in the headline, and did not use explicit photographs or footage. In other words, most media items avoided features that have been deemed 'risk' factors for copycat effects in the media coverage of suicide.

However, the study found around half of the media items catalogued provided a detailed discussion of the method of self-harm and portrayed suicide as a mere social phenomenon. Most failed to provide information of help services. Overall, the project highlighted much scope for an improvement in the Australian media's reporting of suicide.

## **6.7 Conclusions**

As the above overview of research highlights, a concrete association between the media coverage of suicide and actual social behaviour has yet to be proven. Although some studies have found significant increases in suicide after a widely publicised suicide story, others have found no significant effect (Stack 2003: 238). As

such, the link between suicide “stories” and suicide rates remains inconsistent and contradictory (Weimann and Fishman 1995: 551).

Indeed, several studies have also shown the transmission of social models in social networks probably has an even greater influence than mediating models presented by the mass media (Schmidtke and Häfner 1989: 325). Others note that the interpretation of research findings suggesting various forms of publicity may increase suicide risk remains controversial (Beautrais 2000: 427). The fact not all research has supported the direct effect of media reports and depictions of suicide on actual suicides has been widely attributed to the methodological differences among studies (Stack 2000: 957; Gould and Shaffer 1989: 331; Gould et al 2003: 1272).

### *Methodological issues*

Determining the “causality” of media portrayals of suicide and actual suicide has proven particularly difficult. Most studies have been based on correlational designs and aggregate (as opposed to daily) data and therefore have been unable to demonstrate newspaper coverage of a suicide story occurred before the observed increase in suicide rates (Schmidtke and Häfner 1989). Consequently, direct evidence linking media coverage of suicide to increased suicidal behaviour is still lacking (Beautrais 2000: 428). Much research has failed to take into account the wider social, cultural, and economic influences beyond those of the mass media on suicidal behaviour. An example of the tendency to overlook forces beyond the mass media as explanations for suicidal behaviour can be found in Phillip’s benchmark (1974; 1977) works. These works have been criticised for their failure to acknowledge the covariations could be explained by economic cycles (Schmidtke and Häfner 1989: 318). As Schmidtke and Häfner (1989: 325) note: “[w]hatever influence the media may have on suicidal behaviour, any discussion of such effects should take into account the fact that the media are only one feature of the social environment in which social behaviour can be learned.”

Another central limitation of studies suggesting copycat suicide is that, while associations are drawn between the presence of a suicide story and a rise in the social suicide rate, it is typically not known to what extent the people concerned were aware of the suicide story (Stack 2003: 238). This is especially so in the ecological studies that have dominated scientific enquiry to date because they are unable to directly measure whether the actual suicide victims were exposed to stories about real or fictional suicides (Mercy et al 2001: 121). Indeed, several authors have criticised the ecological studies for their failure to provide evidence showing the suicidal individuals themselves viewed the newspapers, television news, or films about suicide (Steede and Range 1989: 167; Berman 1988: 983; Simkin et al 1995: 754).

Many of the criticisms of the ecological studies are seen to be overcome by the individual-level studies. In these studies, researchers can ensure subjects are exposed to the stimulus before they are asked about their attitudes towards suicide (Pirkis and Blood 2001a:17). However, one of the main criticisms levelled at the individual-level studies is that the dependent variable is always about attitudes (eg towards those who suicide and their families) and perceptions (eg of the likelihood of suicidal behaviour being imitated by self or others) (Pirkis and Blood 2001a:17). The central difficulty is the self-reports may not be accurate and the reported attitudes may have little bearing on reality. In addition, the subjects in the individual-level studies are always drawn from the “normal” population. It has been suggested suicide stories in the mass media are most likely to influence those who are already vulnerable. Because such people may be under-represented in the samples chosen

to take part in the individual-level studies, this research may underestimate the impact of the press on imitative suicides (Pirkis and Blood 2001a:17).

Other researchers suggest the problem with much existing research is the dearth of any detailed analyses of media representations of suicide. The majority of research has been concerned with cause and effect; the effect of suicide stories on suicide rates, rather than the social construction of the suicide stories themselves. Yet, according to Coyle and MacWhannell (2002: 690), understanding how suicide stories are constructed is important because it enables researchers to comprehend more fully how newspaper reports shape and structure “reality”. This is a central premise behind the content-analytic studies that have appeared more frequently in recent years. These studies offer more insight into the nature of suicide coverage itself. Content-analytic studies have been seen as more useful because they avoid the central limitation of the “effects tradition” of media research that assumes a uniformity of effects on passive audiences. This research was informed by the now out-dated belief the media influenced us like a “magic bullet”, having the same influential effect on everyone (Kral 1994: 248).

However, it is now widely recognised media effects are determined by a number of factors including where the message came from, psychological differences in the population and the nature of the message itself. This recognition has led to research examining the form and the contents of suicide presentations in the media. Indeed, content-analytic research is able to avoid the problematic assumptions of the effects tradition by focusing not on the assumed effects of suicide reporting but instead on the social construction of suicide.

In this respect content-analytic studies are a valuable guidance for reform initiatives such as the implementation of suicide reporting resources for the mass media based on the premise it is the “nature” of reporting (rather than the act of reporting itself) that may have implications for imitative suicide. Just as further research is required to determine more precisely the “causality” of the media reporting on suicide and actual suicide, gaps in research remain as to whether the responsible reporting of suicide may have a positive effect on suicidal behaviour. For example, while some studies have shown non-reporting may be beneficial in suicide prevention (eg Sonneck et al 1994), the potential positive effect of media coverage and publicity has yet to be demonstrated (Goldney 2001: 174).

Therefore, in addition to the negative effects of the media reporting of suicide that most research has focused on to date, the potential for positive effects should be considered when assessing the role and impact of guidelines for the media.

## 7. APPENDIX 2: CPU DRAFT PROTOCOLS FOR REPORTING SUICIDE

The following protocols for the New Zealand media have been proposed by the Commonwealth Press Union New Zealand Section's media freedom committee.

**Attached is the committee's proposal for a set of protocols based on guidelines established in Australia and Britain:**

It is suggested these guidelines be part of a wider document that includes a summary of the research relating to reported suicides and a comprehensive list of contacts for use by the New Zealand media.

### **New Zealand Guidelines for Reporting Suicide**

**In relation to the reporting of suicide, representatives of New Zealand media accept the need to avoid the following:**

- Reporting which might encourage copycat or self-harm.
- Unnecessary reference to details of method or place of suicide.
- Language or presentation that trivialises, romanticises or glorifies suicide, particularly in papers that target young readers.
- Images that add to the pain of relatives and friends of the deceased.

**It is also recommended that, in relation to suicide reporting, the media:**

- Follow media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma when reporting personal tragedy.
- Encourage public understanding of the complexity of suicide.
- Include references to counselling services available to people in distress and their families and provide contact details.

Journalists are encouraged to adopt a responsible approach to the reporting of suicide and consult with reputable associations and individuals when seeking comment for articles on these issues.