

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# Suicide prevention strategies

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The departments of epidemiology and psychiatry, NIMHANS, have been organising a series of workshops on 'Suicide prevention: capacity building strategies' involving doctors, teachers, police staff, etc. to address the issue of increasing suicide rates in Bangalore, the 'suicide capital' of India. The aim of the workshop series was to evolve a National Suicide Prevention Strategy. As a part of this, a workshop was organised for media professionals to examine the role of media in the glamorisation of suicide and to evolve parameters for ethical reporting of suicides. This report refers to some aspects relevant to the medical profession.

It was noted that suicide was becoming a public health problem throughout the country. There was a need to do research on the subject, and to translate the research into practice. The present project was started with a seed grant from the Department of Science and Technology, Government of Karnataka, for work with the police in 12–15 hospitals. The department had prepared two epidemiological reports on suicide. NIMHANS had begun a helpline in Bangalore along with the Medico-Pastoral Association and Rotary Bangalore East.

Most of the research in this field was from the West and would not necessarily be applicable in the Indian context. The causes of suicides were multifactorial with a predominance of sociocultural factors in India. Some studies from the West have suggested that media portrayal of suicides did have an effect on the increasing suicide rates in the country but this needs to be studied in India.

Suicide attempts not only affected the individual but also the family and community. The media needed to step in and address trends promoting suicide. The impact of cinema was substantial and was working against efforts to prevent suicide attempts. It was felt that the media sometimes indulged in irresponsible reporting, such as the sensationalising of celebrity suicides.

Two queries were raised. Did the media have the power to trigger suicides in some people? Did it also have the power to prevent suicide?

It was suggested that there were limitations in the way the media could respond appropriately to suicide. The fact is that the press could just be a mirror of the society. The mass media could only act as a catalyst and it was for society to change.

Data by the group Mythri from Cochin, where there was a falling trend of suicides, showed that in the reporting of suicides, unusual methods such as suicide pacts and celebrity suicides got prominence. However, there was under-reporting of preventable health problems such as depression, of people who had managed to deal positively with their suicidal thoughts, and of early identification and prevention in those at risk. Media suicide stories with a potential 'contagion' effect were those that paid undue emphasis on the method, were repeated prominently, involved celebrities, and highlighted oversimplified causes and suicides associated with a touch of glorification.

There was also a need for a commitment to tackle this problem by the medical profession. Thus a panel discussion was moderated by Ms Shailaja Santosh and involved artists, journalists and medical professionals. Among the main points that emerged was that health professionals need to consider meeting journalists as an opportunity and not a threat. Some other general principles: learn to listen to the cry for help; learn to share when depressed; and when you encounter severe depression, consult experts.

Some suggestions included counselling training for school teachers so that they could help during examinations; reorientation of general practitioners so that they could identify the depressed and counsel them at the earliest; working at different levels with formal and informal community leaders, and pre-examination counselling for students as well as teachers/parents.

To conclude, there was a need to strike a balance between freedom of expression, freedom of the media, public health interest (minimising the risks) and the commercial interests that influence media reporting and policy. The workshop concluded with the framing of guidelines for media reporting of suicides.