Psychiatry and the Law

The Impact of Media Coverage on Suicide

Dominique Bourget, MD, FRCPC, CSPQ¹, Pierre Gagné, MD, FRCPC, CSPQ², Serge Turmel, MD³

Abstract: The suicide of a popular television news reporter was the object of intense media coverage, involving several types of media over a period of several months in early 1999. Subsequently, a significant increase in the rates of suicide between 1998 and 1999 was observed, giving rise again to the question of imitative suicide. Several elements suggested that this increase was at least, in part, due to the phenomenon of imitative suicide. Based on this case, the paper expands further on the notion of imitative suicide and the impact of media coverage on suicide and addresses the influence of the reporting method.

Résumé: L’effet de la couverture média tique du suicide


Key Words: media, suicide, suicide by imitation

Several studies reported an association between media coverage of suicide and suicidal behaviour. The concept of suicide by imitation originated in 1774 after the publication of a romantic story by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, entitled The Sorrows of Young Werther (1). Werther was a young man of high intelligence and passion who became obsessed with speculative dreams, and out of severe despair, eventually committed suicide by shooting himself. The book became very popular in Europe. Within a short period of time, however, many young men committed suicide using the same method as Werther. The book was blamed, even banned in some cities. This led to the expression called the “Werther effect.” Farr, in 1841, stated that no fact was better established in science than that suicide is often committed by imitation (2). In his well-known publication on suicide, Durkheim included a whole chapter on this topic to conclude that suicide by imitation is nothing more than the precipitation of a suicide destined to occur sooner or later (3).

In the 20th century, further studies explored the role of media on suicide. Essentially, studies looked at two types of media: written press and electronic press (including news reporting and fiction stories). Phillips compared the monthly rates of suicide between 1948 and 1968 with the front page New York Times suicide articles (4). He demonstrated a significant increase in the monthly rates after 26 of 33 articles and found that the number of reports correlated with the geographical location where these took place. After a proliferation of suicides in the Vienna metro, a working group called the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention developed guidelines on media reporting (1). The quality of reports changed in mid-1987, and the number of suicides dropped by 75 per cent. Bollen and Phillips reported on the increase in the number of suicides for up to 10 days after television reports of suicidal stories for the years 1972 to 1976 (5). Effects were significant, even after corrections for weekday, holiday, season and variability. Phillips and Carstensen looked at the effect of suicide television news on American teenagers and found that multi-program, multi-channel and highly publicized stories had the greatest impact and were the most likely to affect youngsters, predisposed or not (6). In yet another authoritative study, Schmidtke and Häfner described an increase in imitative suicides following a six-episode fiction story that featured the suicide of a young man jumping in front of a train (7). This affected mostly men in the same age group as the suicide victim.

¹Forensic psychiatrist, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario; Coroner, Quebec.
²Forensic psychiatrist, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Sherbrooke; Coroner, Quebec.
³Coroner-in-chief, Bureau du Coroner, Quebec City, Quebec.
Strategies to prevent suicide have traditionally included the treatment of suicidal individuals, the development of help programs or centres and the control of the environment (8). Among the methods to control the environment, some studies have favoured the attenuation of suicide reporting in the media. In 1995, Lithuania introduced a series of interventions to evaluate and modify the reports on suicide (8). From 1994 to 1996, the suicide rate remained stable but dropped in 1997-1998, suggesting the efficacy of changes.

One Case of Intense Media Coverage

In mid-January 1999, in Quebec, a popular television news reporter committed suicide by hanging with his belt. This suicide was the object of intense media coverage, involving several types of media over a period of several months following the event.

Method

Using statistical data from the coroner, monthly suicide rates in previous years (1995-1998) were compared with those of 1999 and of the subsequent year (Figure 1). We also examined the suicide distribution by sex and by method.

Results

There was a significant increase in the rates of suicide between 1998, where the total was 1333, and 1999, where the total was 1605 suicides (Table 1). The increase in suicide was 12.5 per cent. Statistical differences in monthly rates for 1998 and 1999 are significant. Men between age

Table 1 Suicides in the general population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th></th>
<th>1998</th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14.88</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>20.33</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>22.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>19.74</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>18.46</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>25.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>17.82</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>19.97</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>24.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>19.28</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>19.44</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>21.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>18.62</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>19.91</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>21.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>19.61</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>20.10</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>21.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>18.67</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>19.83</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>23.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All differences between 1998 and 1999 are significant $P \leq 0.05$
20 and 49 years accounted mostly for this rise (Table 2). Suicide by hanging increased by 20.4 per cent in men and by 7.4 per cent in women (Table 3). A comparison of the methods shows that hanging accounted for 70.3 per cent of the increase in suicides (Table 4).

**Discussion**

It is difficult to establish definite proof of the media impact on this increase, but several elements suggest that this increase was at least, in part, due to the phenomenon of imitative suicide. This increase in suicide by 12.5 per cent from 1998 to 1999 followed a broad and intense coverage in the electronic and written press of a public person suicide. The television reporter (a media person) benefited from an esteemed image in the population, one of a modern hero who denounced the abuse against consumers. The coroners’ investigative reports often noted the presence of references to the suicide of this person in suicide notes or in oral testimonies left by other victims prior to their suicide. This was the case with six teenagers and several adults who committed suicide. Interestingly, there was also a 12 per cent increase in suicides in the U.S. in the month after the media reported on the suicide of Marilyn Monroe (9).

While numerous studies clearly established the impact of media on suicide, the overall effect is estimated to account for 1 per cent to 5 per cent of the suicides (10,11). The phenomenon of imitative suicide has led, in many countries, to the establishment of guidelines by media when reporting suicide (9). Several studies have given credence to the concept of “dose-response,” with repeated multi-channel, multi-media exposure to the news (6,7,12). Several factors having to do with “how” the suicide is reported will potentially modify the impact of media on...
suicide (1) The impact of the news will be greater if the suicide is glorified, glamorized or romanticized; simplifications on the cause are used; the suicide is reported as “inconceivable” and if the method is discussed in detail. Media attention is greater when the text is in the front page with the word “suicide” in the headline, along with a photograph of the deceased. The impact is lower if alternatives are shown and if readers are educated on suicidal behaviour and suicide prevention in general (11,12). By developing a positive relationship with the media, there is an opportunity for public education and for advocating suicide prevention. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and The Annenberg Public Policy Centre posted new guidelines on their respective Web sites (9).

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Quebec Coroner’s Office, the University of Ottawa and the University of Sherbrooke.

References