



THE HONG KONG JOCKEY CLUB  
Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

# Suicide and the Media: Recommendations on Suicide Reporting for Media Professionals



The University of Hong Kong

After the incident, many reporters came to my home, but I didn't answer any questions. On the following day the newspaper headline said, "Wife of Gambling fireman hangs"..... which was totally untrue, I was furious.

Extracted from the interview manuscript of "Psychological Autopsy Study of Suicide", research project conducted by our centre. The interviewee claimed that the media did not report the story in a fair manner but attributed gambling as the only reason of the tragedy.

Hong Kong is already a tragic society. Why do the newspapers use such tragic and sensational photos as their selling point? What is editorial freedom? It is actually "raping" the readers' conscience.

Extracted from a complaint to the Hong Kong Press Council for the newspaper's presentation of a mother and son who committed suicide

Suicide is a legitimate subject for news reporting but the factual reporting of suicides may encourage others. Reports should avoid glamorizing 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. Sensitive use of language is also important.

BBC Producers' Guideline - Values, Standards and Principles, Chapter 2 p. 48

We didn't include that fact in the story out of sensitivity to the boy's family and because of the newspaper's policy of only reporting suicide that's committed in public or by a public or well-known figure. Self-inflicted death done in the privacy of a home usually doesn't make the paper

Bill Ketter, Editor-in-chief of the Eagle-Tribune Newspapers, Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA

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## Foreword:

With an estimated 850,000 deaths due to suicide and well beyond 15 million suicide attempts, every year suicidal behaviour is now acknowledged as a major global public health problem. It hits particularly the young, and worldwide currently deaths from suicide are among the top three causes of death among people aged 15-35 years, for both males and females.

In spite of the fact that in most places of the world mortality rates associated with suicide are higher among men than among women, in mainland China, particularly, suicide is the first cause of death of women in the ages between 15 and 35 years. Also, Hong Kong's suicide rate has increased significantly, with a rate of 18.2 per 100,000 in 2003 which is above the world average, 14.5 per 100,000. The increase in suicide deaths among the middle age people and the use of charcoal burning are of particularly concern.

Therefore, identifying efficient interventions for the prevention of suicidal behaviour is a major task for health authorities. And among those interventions that have demonstrated their effectiveness stands the proper presentation by the media of information related to suicide, either when noticing suicidal deaths of public figures or, in a more educational role, about ways of handling personal difficulties and guidance on how and where to find the help needed in such circumstances.

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The publication of this book is, therefore, warmly welcomed. I do hope the successful experience of the collaboration between professional media organisations, Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention Centre in Hong Kong in producing this mass media guidebook will help to reduce the number of suicides in Hong Kong. It is fated to become a central tool in engaging the media in a positive collaboration for the reduction of this devastating public health problem.

**Dr J. M. Bertolote**

Coordinator, Management of Mental and Brain Disorders  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse  
World Health Organization

## Foreword:

In recent years, the number of local suicide cases has been increasing, and how the media reports those suicide cases has aroused public concern. Researchers assert the correlation between media coverage and suicide. As a responsible media association, the Hong Kong News Executives' Association understands the seriousness of this problem and recognizes our role in the prevention of suicide. Therefore, when invited by Dr. Paul Yip from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research & Prevention and our former chairman Mr. Leung Tin-wai to participate in the consultation of this recommendation, we have definite responsibility to support this project.

Thanks to the enormous effort of Dr. Yip, Mr. Leung and Prof. Yuen-ying Chan from the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong, this recommendation is now published and provides useful references for journalists. I would like to express my gratitude to all experts and scholars who have contributed to this project. I also sincerely recommend this publication to all fellow journalists as a reference for coverage of suicide cases. I whole-heartedly hope every journalist can make a contribution to the prevention of suicide in Hong Kong.

**Ms. May Suk-mei Chan**

Chairperson of the Hong Kong News Executives' Association

(Original foreword is written in Chinese. English version is translated by the book editor.)



## Foreword:

A classical dilemma in practical journalism is whether a journalist should rescue or report first when s/he witness an attempted suicide case. The classical answer is that journalists are also human, and so they should rescue first, in order to fulfill the responsible of human beings.

Scholars have been debating on media ethics endlessly, but media ethics is actually ethics of human beings. “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others”. If reporters and editors can put themselves into the victims’ shoes, greater leniency can be achieved.

The first code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists is to seek truth and report it, and the second is to minimize harm. It is not “do not do harm”, as the truth is always full of cruelty. If the truth is reported, the victims often suffer. The media also tends to report the miserable things rather than the happy ones. The journalists, however, are responsible to minimize the harm to the victims.

There are many factors contributing to the increasing suicide cases, we cannot solely blame the media as the messenger. Experts cannot come to a conclusion that media coverage and suicide are absolutely correlated. But it is generally accepted that sensational reporting may lead to the increase of suicides. Journalists have the social responsibility to report suicide cases in an impartial, objective and unsensationalized manner.

I am glad to see the cooperation between the Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention and the local media. I hope the publication of this guideline to be a good start for further collaboration. Such a close connection and cooperation between the academy and practitioners can lead to an improvement of media standards and the betterment of society. This is definitely the felicity of both the media and the audiences.

**Prof. Yuen-ying Chan**

Director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre  
The University of Hong Kong

## Foreword:

Recent studies have indicated that media reports may exert influence over suicidal behaviour. WHO and other suicide prevention organizations have made similar warnings and introduced guidelines to the media. Our objective in publishing this booklet is to introduce recent studies and findings of both local and foreign experiences. Any inappropriate suicide reporting can lead to potentially negative influences on the vulnerable group of people. We hope all the media professionals should minimize this harm and contribute to the suicide prevention.

Suicide in Hong Kong has become a major concern. In 2003, the number of suicide case was 1,238, with a rate 18.2 per 100,000. This historical high with an increasing trend has been a great concern in our society.

One of our center's objectives is to build a communication platform, to provide information and training to the professionals engaged in suicide prevention. We are honoured to have Mr. Tin Wai Leung as our chief editor of this booklet. He has taken up a crucial role to liaise with the media professional bodies. We would like to thank the courteous assistance from the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong. They have provided their professional advice from the media point of view. Furthermore, during the preparation of this booklet, we are delighted to have the valuable opinions from the committee members of Hong Kong News Executive Association (HKNEA), which is indeed a great opportunity to open a dialogue between media professionals and suicide researchers. Both parties have learnt from each others and have created a healthy environment of interaction. Even we might have different opinions on certain topics, I believe our dialogue itself is opened in a progressive and rational ways, which has built up a solid foundation for our future development. We are glad to have HKNEA's recommendation on introduction of this booklet to the local media professionals. We are also honored that Dr J. M. Bertolote, Coordinator, Management of Mental and Brain Disorders, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO, has written the foreword for us. He has shown his concern about the suicide of Hong Kong and Mainland.

With all these sincere and diligent co-operations, we have built up a strong foundation to prevent suicide. As Dr. Edwin Shneidman (1996), advocated, "Suicide Prevention is everybody's business". I sincere hope that all parties in our community can contribute their best effort to prevent suicide.

**Paul Yip, Ph.D.**

Director

The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention  
The University of Hong Kong



# News Story and Suicide

The media plays an important role as a mass communication channel in the society, through which, news stories exert powerful influence on the construction of social norms and values. In recent years, the number of suicide cases in Hong Kong has shown a drastic increase. How our media report suicide has drawn great concern from the public, there are strict criticisms on the breach of code of ethics. The general public worries that detailed media accounts of suicidal acts may encourage vulnerable people or youngsters to imitate them.

We understand the difficulties the media face with when reporting any suicide story. In fact, the causes of action are usually complicated. The deceased's identity, mental condition and problems encountered are closely related to his/her fatal attempt; it is a great task to clarify all information under the time strain. However, due to the keen market competition, journalists might have to report unconfirmed materials to meet deadlines.

From various studies, we have reason to recognize the association between portrayal of suicide and subsequent actual suicides is causal<sup>1</sup>. The detailed description of suicide methods, the dramatized death, the deceased's photo being shown and the big font headline may cause great impact. And youngsters seem to be the most vulnerable to the influence<sup>2,3</sup>.

For this reason, countries such as USA, UK, New Zealand and Australia have issued guidelines for media reporting suicide. The World Health Organization (WHO) has listed "toning down reports in the media" as one of its six key strategies on suicide prevention. The Hong Kong News Executives' Association (HKNEA) and the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) have established codes of ethics including guidelines about suicide reporting<sup>4,5</sup>.

This booklet aims to assist frontline journalists to be more aware of the potential positive and negative influences that may incur. To supplement the existing guidelines, the booklet will provide relevant research results and experiences from other countries. We encourage self-disciplines. Our aim is to minimize the "copycat effects" on the vulnerable group but in the meantime to preserve the freedom of the press.

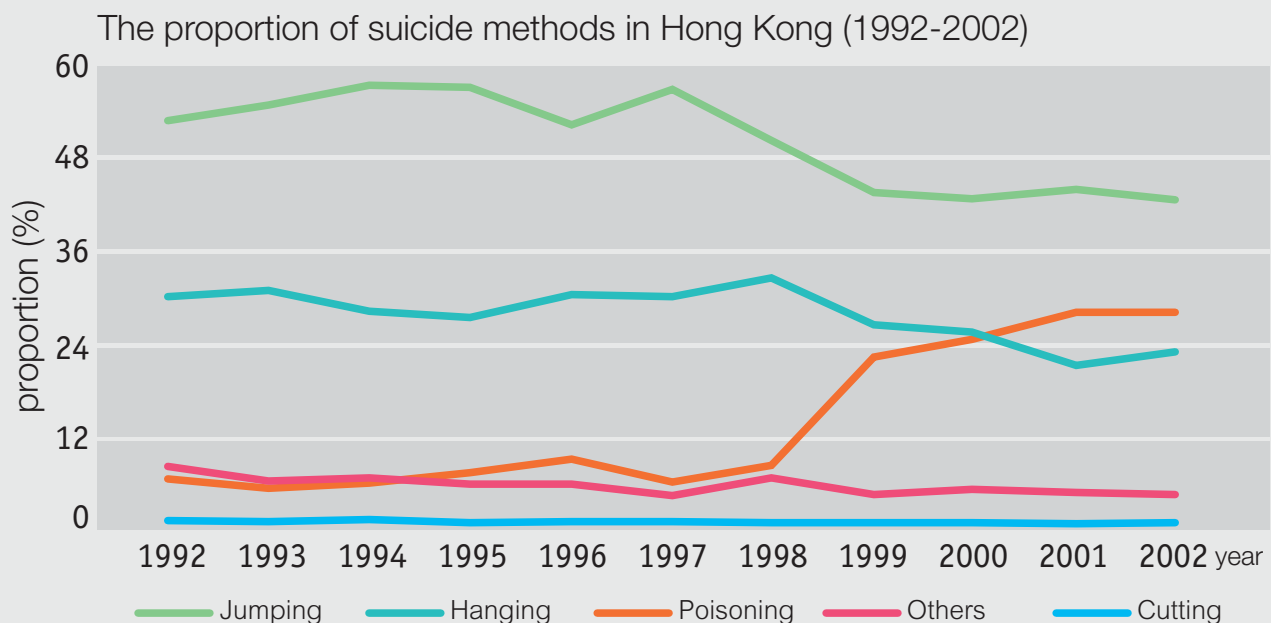
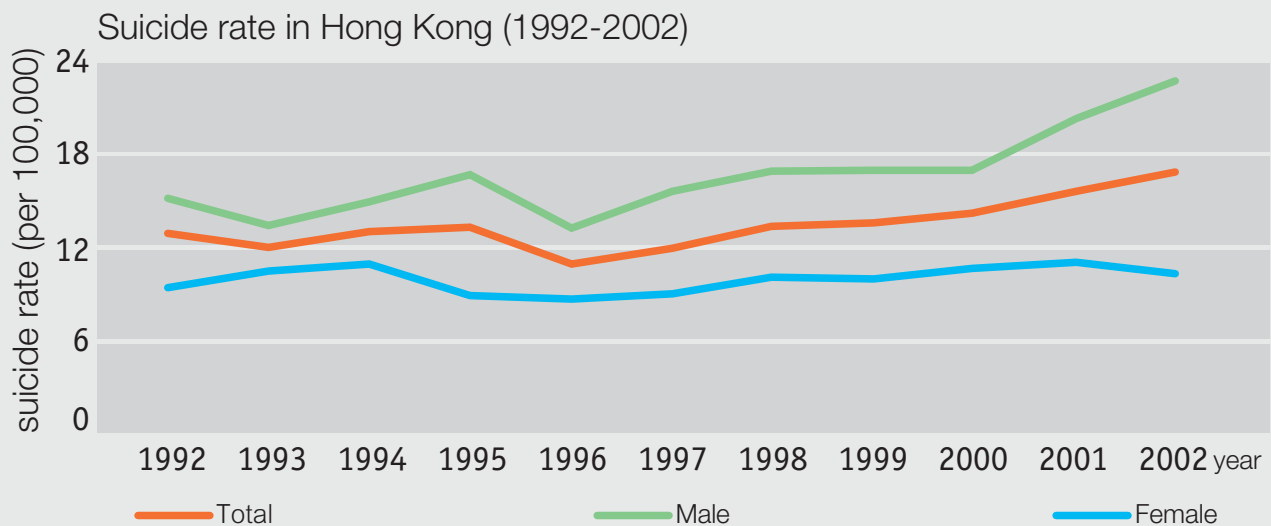


## Suicide in Hong Kong at a glance

Based on the data from the Coroners' Court and analysis of our center, about 1,238 people committed suicide in 2003, at a ratio of 18.2 to 100,000 people, which is over 11% higher than the suicide rate in 2002. This figure is higher than the world's average rate of 15.0. Suicide has become the 6<sup>th</sup> killer in Hong Kong, and 3 to 4 people commit suicide everyday<sup>6</sup>.

Middle aged people have become a high-risk group. Their suicide rate was 18.9 in 2002, 16% higher than the average suicide rate in Hong Kong. Not to neglect the young group of age 15 to 24, where the rate increase from 9.0 in 2001 to 12.7 in 2002 has alarmed the public.

Moreover, charcoal-burning has become a prevalent method since 1998, and the situation is getting worsen these days. Among all suicide methods, the rate of charcoal-burning increased from 3% in 1998 to 26.4% in 2003, it is now the second most common method of suicide.



## Suicide Reporting in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, media coverage of suicide or attempted suicide is very common. However, it is controversial how the media report the story. According to the Hong Kong Press Council's web page, the Council denounced certain newspapers' way of reporting three students who burned charcoal to commit suicide on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2002 and denounced several newspapers for publishing photos of two deceased, a mother and her son, who died after falling from a building on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2002.

Our centre analyzed how five major local Chinese newspapers reported suicide stories in 2000<sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup>. About 6% of the suicide cases appeared on the front page, 87% with photos or diagrams, and 93% mentioned the suicide methods in the headlines.



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From the preliminary result of our center's Prevalence Study 2004, 36.9% of the respondents were disturbed, from a little disturbed to very disturbed, by celebrity suicide. 2.4% of the respondents changed the way they saw suicide, and found it to be more acceptable and thought about suicide after the celebrity's suicide. In additions, 68.3% of the respondents were dissatisfied and very dissatisfied with how the media reported the suicide news. 20% of the respondents were influenced by the suicide news reported by the mass media<sup>9</sup>.



## Copycat Effect of Media Reporting

The first known “copycat” case occurred in 1774, when Gothe’s “The Sorrows of the Young Werther” was published. Many youngsters imitated the character of the book to commit suicide. This behaviour was coined as “Werther effect” by the academy<sup>10</sup>.

According to the social learning theory, high-risk suicidal people may learn from news stories or books written about suicide. When they find similarities with the object, they tend to follow the same action to “solve the problem”. The impact would be 10 times or more if the story is about a celebrity or any person known by the public<sup>11</sup>.



In November 1998, the first charcoal-burning case in Hong Kong was widely publicized with detailed illustrations by the media. In the following month, there were 9 more suicides by the same means. Charcoal-burning became one of the most prevalent methods in 1998. In 2003, it even accounted for 26.4% of the total suicide cases in Hong Kong. There are people in our neighborhood areas such as Japan, Macau and Taiwan who also adopted this method to end their lives<sup>12</sup>.

In October 1999, there were several suicide incidents involving school kids. Six young students killed themselves within 11 days and shocked the community. As of November 2003, 4 students had committed suicide in the same school of Tin Shui Wai in two and half years. Voices from our community blamed this as the copycat effect.

In April 2003, famous artiste Leslie Cheung died of falling from a building; in the following 9 hours there were 5 more suicides committed by the same means<sup>13</sup>. (See more details in examples later).

# Effects of Mass Media

Research studies have indicated the correlation between media reports and the subsequent suicide cases. The more the media mention, on front pages or intensively dramatized, the higher suicide rate to follow<sup>14</sup>.

Suicidal or mentally distressed people are more sensitive to suicide reporting. How detailed the story is can have a great impact on these people, as they may have a tendency to copy or follow the act<sup>15</sup>.

## Newspapers

Researches indicated a higher suicide rate when more suicide news was seen. In 1984, US study revealed that after a celebrity's death by suicide, which was followed by intensive reports and news headlines, there was a remarkable increase in the suicide rate. When the media repeatedly mentioned certain suicide method, similar incidents will follow in increased numbers<sup>16</sup>.

## Television

Studies indicated youngsters' suicidal thought is closely related to how often they watch television. Experts advised that suicidal youths pay more attention to such news on television. These reports may deepen their mind, and they have more exposures to watch and imitate<sup>17</sup>. Researchers also found a substantial increase of suicide cases within 10 days after the television broadcast certain suicide news<sup>18</sup>.

## Drama and Plays

WHO pointed out there is no obvious association between drama or plays and suicidal acts<sup>19</sup>. However, analysis indicated that after a railway suicide drama was seen on TV, there were 60 similar cases occurred in the following 70 days. And the suicides were of same age as the character in the drama<sup>20</sup>.

## Internet

The popularity of the Internet has shown great impact on our daily life. Some websites mentioning various suicide methods draw the public's attention, as these may have adverse influences on youngsters. However, systematic studies on the topic are still limited, and the relation between Internet influences and suicide is not ascertained as of this day<sup>21</sup>. In October 2004, there was a great public concern on the "suicide pact" through Internet. Japanese police had found the bodies of nine people who apparently committed suicide after meeting via special suicide sites on the Internet and then some people in Taiwan adopted the same way to attempt suicide.

# Suspected Cases: News Story Triggered Suicide Acts

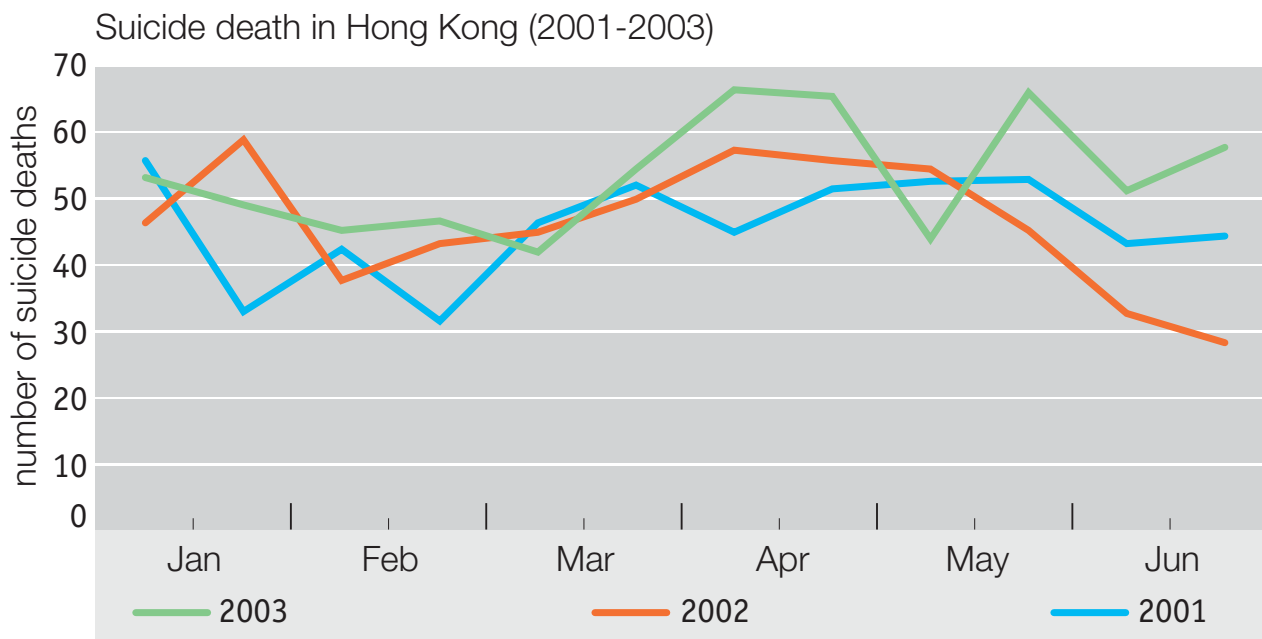
## Local Case: Leslie Cheung



The famous Hong Kong artiste Leslie Cheung fell from a building and died on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003. There were extensive media reports. According to the data from the Coroners' Court and analysis from our centre, the number of suicides increased drastically in the first half of April 2003. Analyzing the demographic of these suicide victims, they were mostly aged from 25 to 39, and chose the same means, jumping, as Cheung did<sup>22</sup>.

As Leslie Cheung's incident occurred during the SARS epidemic, it is not certain to what extent the increase of suicides could be attributed to contagion. However, the suicide rates during SARS period March, May and June 2003 did not increase significantly. On the other hand, study showed that the outbreak of SARS has enhanced social networking and solidarity, which might be a protective factor of suicide. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the copycat effect is related to the increase of suicide rate.

The copycat effect may trigger a certain age group to attempt suicide by the same means. Therefore media professionals should be more cautious when reporting suicide cases.



## Japanese case: Okada Yukiko



On 8<sup>th</sup> April 1986, the young Japanese singer Okada Yukiko jumped out from her company's building and died. She was only 20 at that time.



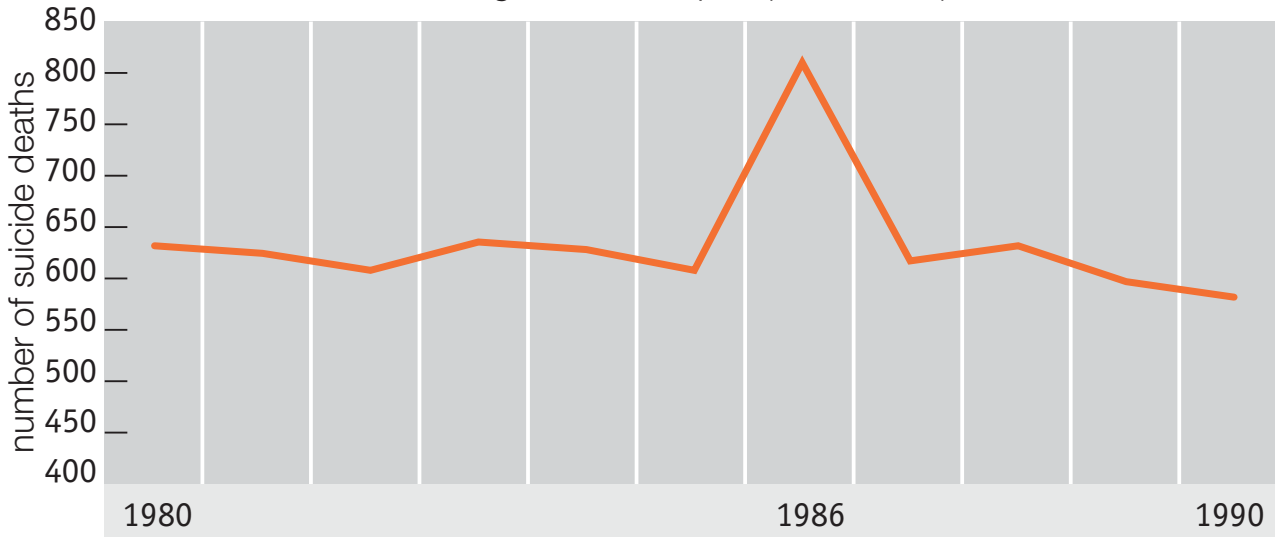
According to Yoshitomo Takahashi, a Japanese scholar specialized in suicide study, the Japanese media reported the case extensively and sensationally with photos and detailed descriptions. As a result, suicide rate in 1986 increased



drastically, and most were youngsters under 20. From the chart there were only 567 and 577 youngster suicides in 1985 and 1987, respectively; but there were 802 cases in 1986<sup>24</sup>.



Suicide death under the age of 20 in Japan (1980-1990)



# Media as a Proactive Role

The above reporting examples indicated the adverse effects of media reporting. However, media can play a proactive role in helping to prevent suicides.

**According to the media resource issued by WHO, "Reporting of suicide in an appropriate, accurate and potentially helpful manner by enlightened media can prevent tragic loss of lives by suicide."<sup>25</sup>**

This booklet aims to assist journalists reporting suicide with more concern and to release any information in a more caring attitude.

## Success Stories of Appropriate Media Reporting

### Case 1

After the Viennese media extensively reported subway suicides, the number increased since 1983. There were 7 cases in 1984, 13 and in 1986. 9 cases were reported in the first half of 1987. In mid 1987, an organization preventing suicides alerted the public by promulgating the media guidelines. Subway suicides dropped to 2 by the end of 1987, 80% less than the first half of the year. (Afterward, there were 3 cases in 1989 and 4 in 1990). Moreover, the overall suicide rate in Vienna also dropped<sup>26</sup>.

### Case 2

In 1994, the suicide death of the famous singer Kurt Cobain did not trigger any substantial increase of similar attempts in his hometown Seattle. The media did not simply glorify his achievements, but also emphasized his death was a wasteful act of giving up life. The news lines also discussed about the risk of committing suicide and ways to seek help<sup>27</sup>.

### Case 3

In the early 1990s, suicide reporting in Switzerland raised the public concern. Scholars and medical practitioners held a conference with the media and set up guidelines. A comparative study of suicides being reported in 1991 and 1994 showed that front pages coverage dropped from 20% (of all news reported) to 4%, photos published reduced from 43% to 8%, and sensational headlines decreased from 62% to 25%. Even though the number of suicide stories increased, the overall suicide rate had a small decrease<sup>28</sup>. This indicated that reporting with caution helps to prevent suicides.





# Professional Media Reporting

The Hong Kong Journalists Association has established guideline on suicide reporting<sup>29</sup>. This passage and the following passage of "Issues on suicide" are extracted from the codes of ethics of WHO<sup>30</sup>, USA<sup>31</sup>, suicide prevention organization<sup>32</sup>, Canada<sup>33</sup> and Australia<sup>34</sup>.

Professional journalists should prevent reporting suicide in a way that could have potential negative effect on the vulnerable group of suicide or youth readers. Media professional can play a role in publicizing the warning signs and to convey the message of help seeking. Their emphasis could include educational purpose and provide only necessary information to the readers. The following principles should be followed by media professionals:

- i) Report news with public interest
- ii) Minimize Harm
- iii) Appropriate reporting

## Placement and Headline

- ◆ Avoid publishing the suicide news on the front page unless the reporting involves public interest;
- ◆ Avoid using large font headline;
- ◆ Avoid mentioning the suicide method or suspected cause such as "jumping" or "charcoal burning" in the headline.

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## Contents

### 1. Wordings

- ◆ Avoid phrases like: "successful suicide", "unsuccessful suicide" or "suicide-prone person";
- ◆ Use "suicide rate" instead of "spread/epidemic of suicide";
- ◆ Don't sensationalize the reporting (especially of the celebrity). Minimize the coverage to only necessary content; the wordings should not be exaggerated;
- ◆ Don't glorify or romanticize suicide;
- ◆ Don't criticize, condemn or sympathize suicide;
- ◆ If the report mentions the full name or other personal information of the deceased or attempter, it may has a wrong signal that suicide people can draw the public attention. The reporting should pay special attention.

### 2. Suicide Method

- ◆ Don't report specific details of the suicide method and its procedures, especially the venue of suicide, the tools used, the amount of pills taken, etc.

### 3. Cause of Death

- ◆ Suicide is never caused by a single reason. Don't over-simplify the explanations for suicide;
- ◆ Suicide should not be reported as unexplainable or a "mystery";
- ◆ The personal history of mental health or drug abuse record should be mentioned.

### 4. Description

- ◆ The news report should not attribute suicide as a choice of solution to any problem (such as bankruptcy or study problem);
- ◆ The sorrow or guilt of the surviving relatives and friends should not be focused, which may be a wrong signal that suicide can draw other people's attention.

### 5. Others

- ◆ The way of presentation should consider the feeling of the surviving relatives and friends. If the photo of the deceased or the surviving relatives and friends is published, this may hurt the survivor deeply.

### Pictorial and Graphic Presentation

- ◆ If the media publishes the photo of the deceased, this may give the false impression to the vulnerable people that committing suicide can make them famous. The reporting should pay special attention to this;
- ◆ Don't illustrate the suicide method or venue of suicide in graphic presentation.

### Seek Help Information

- ◆ Provide solutions, such as information of mental health, hotline numbers and the warning signs of suicidal behaviour;
- ◆ Present the examples of successful counseling;
- ◆ Provide Hotline numbers which help the surviving relatives and friends;
- ◆ Advocate the message "depression is a highly treatable illness".

### TV Reporting

- ◆ Avoid presenting suicide cases as the headline TV news unless the reporting involves public interest;
- ◆ Use precise and accurate wordings;
- ◆ Don't report specific details of the suicide method. Presenting any personal information of the deceased or attempter should pay special attention;
- ◆ Don't romanticize suicide.

# Issues on Suicide

## (i) Suicide Rate and Statistical Data

- ◆ Suicide rate is usually presented as a number of suicide cases per 100,000 people. If the population is too small, the interpretation of suicide rate should be paid special attention. If the population is less than 250,000, it is recommended to present the exact number of cases;
- ◆ When comparing the statistics of different countries, it should be bear in mind that the research methods may vary among countries;
- ◆ If the suicide rate is reported, it is recommended to seek comments from suicide researchers. (Please refer to "Talk to the experts")

## (ii) Celebrity Suicide

- ◆ Undoubtedly, celebrity suicide has great news value, but it can also influence the vulnerable and suicidal people. Media professionals should be very cautious, and should evaluate whether the substance of reporting is essential;
- ◆ Don't glorify the death of celebrity. The news reporting should be just mourning but not romanticize or sensationalize;
- ◆ Suicide is never caused by a single reason. Don't over-simplify the explanations for suicide;
- ◆ Mental illness or drug abuse record of the celebrity should be mentioned clearly.

### **(iii) Interviewing Surviving Relatives and Friends**

- ◆ The surviving relatives and friends usually cannot accept the fact right after the incident. Therefore the media should be considerate and avoid disturbing them;
- ◆ The grieving survivors may have emotional fluctuation or even have suicidal thoughts. Media professional should refer the case to social worker, psychiatrists or healthcare professional;
- ◆ The journalists should bear in mind that the accounts based on the initial reaction of surviving relatives and friends are often unreliable.

### **(iv) Interviewing Suicide Attempter**

- ◆ It is not recommended to interview youngsters about their suicide attempt history, which may have adverse effect to other high risk youngsters;
- ◆ For adult attempters, it is recommended to ask their mind change during counseling, and deliver positive messages to the audiences.

### **(v) Homicide-Suicide**

- ◆ The media should be cautious to this kind of cases. Media professional should be aware that the tragedy of the homicide can mask the suicidal aspect of act. Follow the rules of this recommendation.

### **(vi) Suicide Pact**

- ◆ Suicide pacts are mutual arrangements between two people who kill themselves at the same time. This is uncommon. Media should not simplify the reason as the act of loving individuals who do not wish to be separated.

## Responsible Reporting<sup>35</sup>

### **The New York Times: Grim Reminder on Mental Illness**

<http://www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/3/5.html>

Comment: Reporting the death of a successful businessman does not need to be sensational, but it is good to point out his depression when he was alive. Mental health professional was also interviewed to inform the public about the suicidal risk of depression. Also, the passage analyzed the reasons why many executives were reluctant to seek help, which can enlighten the public.

### **The Buffalo News: The Specter of Suicide**

**People take their lives not over an isolated incident, but usually during a significant psychiatric illness, experts say.**

<http://www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/3/20.html>

Comment: This passage emphasized the relationship between suicide and the mental health rather than the suicide methods or other background information. The passage even pointed out that suicide is not resulted from a single incident, and often related to emotional distress. The journalist did not link up all incidents together unthoughtfully, but emphasized that the story behind was not that simple.



# Inappropriate Reporting: Case 1

Violating the WHO guidelines: Don't report specific details of the method used/Don't publish photographs or suicide notes

Comment: When the first case of charcoal-burning suicide happened in Hong Kong, the media report extensively. Some coverage even used pictorial presentation to illustrate the method of suicide. According to the Archives of General Psychiatry, there were 9 more cases in the following month and charcoal-burning became one of the most prevalent methods of suicide. In 2003, charcoal-burning even accounted for 26.4% of all the overall suicide cases. Some people in our neighbourhood areas like Macau and Taiwan imitated the acts.



# Inappropriate Reporting: Case 2

Violating WHO guideline: Don't report specific details of the method used

Comment: It is highly inappropriate to have red arrows indication of the falling direction of the suicide people. This would act as certain "guidance" to the vulnerable people. In addition, for the same venue where both two incidents took place, the paper mentioned "The 8/F of Times Square" in the headline, which may trigger the suicide ideation of vulnerable people especially when they pass by. The two cases may be relevant to the result of copycat effect.

## 抑鬱漢時代廣場8樓墮斃

【明報專訊】這人悲劇的糾纏漢時代廣場，昨午發生罕見的2宗跳樓事件。一名因生意失敗患上抑鬱症、近來入院治療的中年漢，昨日家人陪同離開一天外出散心，其間在時代廣場商場8樓的透欄杆一躍而下，直墮2樓平台，送院證實不治。

昨日商場商場高層則目擊到購物的市民，不少人目擊到樓上透欄杆，尖叫聲四起，死者隨即墮過平台一瞬間將更衣室內，遺棄了血淋淋場面。據一名目擊者指出，當時聽到一聲巨響，是以再發生慘劇。

### 生意失敗曾兩次輕生

時代廣場商場2樓平台近日為警員圍圍，放置了一種數層樓高的巨大聖誕樹，並搭建了舞台，後台有數間臨時更衣室。死者回到家時，43歲，與家人居住香港中環鴨洲大對，據悉，日前該男在劇生意，去年11月生意失敗，妻上押銀屋，曾兩次輕生。於前晚時發現其到，家人見地而憤絕，約8星期前他往瑪麗醫院求醫，留院治療，昨日家人特別向院方申請將其出院散心。

昨午何妻等親友陪同離開醫院，到時代廣場遊街，其間何不斷自言自語說「對不起你們」，至下午3時24分，一隊人在8樓商場樓梯升降機處時，何突然之間，再過升降機旁邊的4呎高欄杆，一躍而下，直墮2樓平台，擊穿一個臨時更衣室的帆布頂，跌入更衣室中，倒面再撞車送院，證實不治，警方接報事件為可疑。

### 同一地點3年第二宗

2008年2月16日，時代廣場亦曾發生跳樓自殺案，21歲留學澳洲的大學生，在離港前夕在商場8樓墮下，直墮2樓平台死亡。另外，前年11月，一名41歲男子疑因欠債，在商場2樓欄杆邊上跳下，報警送院救治。



▲在時代廣場8樓跨透欄杆自殺的男子，直墮2樓平台臨時舞台後的更衣室中（箭嘴所示）。（任顯熊攝）

▲患抑鬱症的事主撞樓後昏迷，送院證實不治。（任顯熊攝）

# Inappropriate Reporting: Case 3

## Violating WHO guidelines: Don't give simplistic reasons

Comment: The passage claimed that the deceased was "addicted to soccer betting" and "left a large sum of loan". However, the surviving relatives revealed to the interviewer of CSRP that the victim just borrowed \$7000 from other relatives, such should not be "a large sum of loan", and a large part of it was for living expenses rather than soccer betting. The relatives also claimed that the deceased had started to engage in soccer betting for a short period of time, and our centre could not find evidence to support that the deceased was a pathological gambler. The newspaper just simplified the cause of death to be the debt problem from gambling, which was unfair to the deceased and his family. It also has a wrong signal to the other people in debt that suicide is a way to solve the problem.

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## FAQ <sup>36</sup>

### **1. Can interviewing people who have attempted suicide help the prevention of suicide?**

It depends on who is telling the story and how it is told. If an adult suicide attempter is interviewed, it may be helpful if he/she shares the emotional change and talks about the negative consequence of suicide and the way of seeking help. Interviewing youngsters may be harmful. It may be a wrong signal to them that suicide can draw public attention.

### **2. Would people become suicidal just by reading about suicide?**

There is no reason to believe that someone who is not suicidal can become so by reading a news story. Our concern is that someone who is suicidal may be stimulated to act by the nature of what is read. Those who work for the media might feel that the press should report suicide. What the recommendations convey is that there are responsible and helpful ways of doing so that minimize risk.

### **3. If someone is going to commit suicide, can media reporting change their mind?**

In fact, the majority of people who consider suicide are ambivalent. They are not sure that they want to die. They are just discontent with the reality. If some people can offer them help and counseling, their suicidal thoughts may be altered.

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### **4. Many people just claim to commit suicide but do not actually try to do it?**

In fact, people who have attempted suicide would have greater chance to retry than any ordinary people. According to different studies, about 30-60% of suicide attempters have tried it before. About 15-25% of them would commit suicide again in one year time, and about 40% of deaths by suicide have attempted suicide in the past<sup>37</sup>. Therefore we should not overlook their claims and but refer them to seek help.

### **5. If we stop reporting about specific methods used to commit suicide, won't they just find another way to kill themselves?**

There is research evidence that media recommendations have an impact on the overall suicide rate, not just the rate for a specific method. For example, the overall suicide rate in Vienna decreased steadily after the promulgation of recommendations, which dramatically stopped the reporting of subway suicides. While the sharpest decrease was for subway suicides, there was no increase in other methods of suicide, indicating no substitution effect of suicide method.

## 6. Would the recommendations conflict with the press freedom?

Freedom of the press and the above suggestions are both based on the public interest. While the media has their freedom, at the same time they should be responsible to the public. When we learn that media coverage of suicide may exert adverse impacts on some readers, the media should pay special attention to the issue.

## 7. The causes of suicide are complicated. Why should the media bear the burden?

In fact, causes of suicide are complicated and never resulted from a single factor. Therefore the responsibility does never lie on any single party. Suicide prevention is the responsibility of everyone. When we learn that media coverage of suicide may exert adverse impacts on some readers, the media should pay special attention to the issue. On the other hand, media can also play an active and positive role in suicide prevention.

## 8. Where can I find the information about suicide in Hong Kong? Who can I interview on this issue?

The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention is specialized on the evidence-based research on Hong Kong's suicide problem. Our monitoring and surveillance system gathers all local suicide statistics. Our staff can help any journalists to work on their reports. For more details, please visit the website <http://csrp.hku.hk> or call 2241-5013.

## 9. Anything else we need to learn about suicide?

Please visit <http://csrp.hku.hk/myth> for "Suicidal Myths and Facts".

## 10. What is depression? How does it relate to suicide?

It is noted that a large proportion of people who committed suicide had certain mental illnesses when they were alive. Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses. If you experience any five of the following symptoms, and the symptoms persist for more than two weeks, which significantly affect your study, work and/or relation with others, you should consult with professional or seek help.

◆ Irritability	◆ Constant feelings of fatigue
◆ Low mood	◆ Difficulty in concentrating
◆ Loss of interest in all activities	◆ Feelings of hopelessness about the future
◆ Insomnia or hypersomnia	◆ Feelings of worthlessness
◆ Rapid loss/gain in appetite	◆ Frequent thoughts of death or suicide
◆ Dramatic weight loss/gain	

## WHAT TO DO & WHAT NOT TO DO <sup>38</sup>

**"Reporting of suicide in an appropriate, accurate and potentially helpful manner by enlightened media can prevent tragic loss of lives by suicide."**

Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals,  
World Health Organization (2000)

- ◆ It is reasonable to recognize the association between portrayal of suicide and subsequent actual suicides is causal. People with suicidal ideation seem to be most vulnerable to the influence of the media;
- ◆ Media professionals can play an important and positive role in helping to prevent suicide;
- ◆ The following suggestions can act as reference to media professionals to minimize the adverse impacts on vulnerable people.

WHAT TO DO	WHAT NOT TO DO
1. Work closely with health authorities in presenting the facts.	1. Don't publish photographs or suicide notes.
2. Refer to suicide as a completed suicide, not a successful one.	2. Don't report specific details of the method used.
3. Present only relevant data, and on the inside pages.	3. Don't give simplistic reasons.
4. Highlight alternatives to suicide.	4. Don't glorify or sensationalize suicide.
5. Provide information on helplines and community resources.	5. Don't use religious or cultural stereotypes.
6. Publicize risk indicators and warning signs.	6. Don't apportion blame.



# Internet Resources

## Hong Kong

### **Hong Kong Press Council "Journalists' Code of Professional Ethics"**

<http://www.presscouncil.org.hk/e/defaultc.htm>

### **Hong Kong News Executives' Association "Journalists' Code of Professional Ethics"**

<http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/nea/code-en.html>

### **Hong Kong Journalists Association "HKJA GUIDELINES ON COVERAGE OF SUICIDES"**

<http://www.freeway.org.hk/hkja/ethics/index.htm>

### **Hong Kong Press Photographers Association "Journalists' Code of Professional Ethics"**

<http://www.hkppa.org.hk/guideline.htm>

### **The Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, The University of Hong Kong**

<http://csrp.hku.hk>

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## International

### **World Health Organization's resource**

[http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/resources/suicide/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/resources/suicide/en/)

### **Samaritans' Media Guidelines**

[http://www.samaritans.org.uk/know/media\\_guide.shtm](http://www.samaritans.org.uk/know/media_guide.shtm)

### **The PressWise Trust - Suicide and the media**

[http://212.100.226.243:11000/display\\_page.php?id=166](http://212.100.226.243:11000/display_page.php?id=166)

### **BBC Producers' Guideline - Values, Standards and Principles**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer\\_guides/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/policies/producer_guides/)

### **American Foundation of Suicide Prevention - Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media**

<http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/ipe/docs/afsmedia.pdf>

# Internet Resources (cont'd.)

## **American Foundation of Suicide Prevention - Suicide Contagion**

<http://www.afsp.org/research/articles/gould.html>

## **American Association of Suicidology - Video Evaluation Guidelines**

<http://www.suicidology.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=26>

## **Canadian Association For Suicide Prevention \* Media Guidelines**

<http://www.thesupportnetwork.com/CASP/mediaguidelines.html>

## **New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy - The reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media**

<http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/0/a72dcd5037cfe4c3cc256bb5000341e9?OpenDocument>

## **Suicide Sensitive Journalism Handbook (Sri Lanka)**

[http://www.cpalanka.org/research\\_papers/suicide\\_report.pdf](http://www.cpalanka.org/research_papers/suicide_report.pdf)

## **Examples of good and problematic reporting (from American Foundation for Suicide Prevention)**

<http://www.afsp.org/education/recommendations/3/index.html>

## **Fact or Fiction? Reporting Mental Illness and Suicide (published by Hunter Institute of Mental Health, University of Newcastle)**

[http://www.responseability.org/ConstructionFiles/32102\\_FactorFictionGuide.pdf](http://www.responseability.org/ConstructionFiles/32102_FactorFictionGuide.pdf)

## **Suicide and the Media - a Critical Review**

[http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/med\\_suicide.pdf](http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/med_suicide.pdf) (Full report)

[http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/med\\_execsum.pdf](http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/med_execsum.pdf) (Executive Summary)

## **The Media Monitoring Project: A Baseline Description of how the Australian Media Report and Portray Suicide and Mental Health and Illness**

<http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/pa6568media.pdf> (Full report)

<http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/resources/other/pa6568execsum.pdf> (Executive Summary)

## **Reporting Suicide and Mental illness**

[http://www.mindframe-media.info/rsmi\\_full.pdf](http://www.mindframe-media.info/rsmi_full.pdf) (Full report)

[http://www.mindframe-media.info/qr\\_suicide.pdf](http://www.mindframe-media.info/qr_suicide.pdf) (Quick reference)

<http://www.mindframe-media.info/> (Further information)



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- <sup>38</sup> Ibid. to 19

# Talk to the Experts

## Suicide Statistics, Public Health Policy and General questions

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**Director and Professor**

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The University of Hong Kong  
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## Crisis Hotlines

**Family Caritas Crisis** Tel: 18288

**The Samaritans** Tel: 2896-0000

**Samaritan Befrienders** Tel: 2389-2222

**Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre**  
Tel: 2319-1177

**Social Welfare Department Hotline**  
Tel: 2343-2255

**Suicide Prevention Services**  
Tel: 2382-0000

## Local Suicide Prevention Partners

**Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide  
Research and Prevention**

<http://csrp.hku.hk>

**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, HKSAR  
Government**

<http://www.hwfb.gov.hk/>

**Department of Health, HKSAR Government**

<http://www.info.gov.hk/dh>

**Hospital Authority, HKSAR Government**

<http://www.ha.org.hk/>

**The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong**

<http://www.sbhk.org.hk/>

**The Samaritans-HK**

<http://www.samaritans.org.hk/>

**Suicide Prevention Services**

<http://www.sps.org.hk/>

**Tung Wah Group of Hospital Healthy  
Budgeting Family Debt Counseling Centre**

<http://fdcc.tungwahcsd.org/main.html>

**Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre**

<http://fcsc.caritas.org.hk/>



# Hong Kong Journalists Association

## "Guidelines on Coverage of Suicides"

1. Coverage of recent suicides has caused serious concern among some circles in Hong Kong. Media studies in overseas countries have pointed out that coverage of such cases creates a so-called "copy-cat" effect, prompting more people to choose suicide as a way to solve their problems. However, academics are not unanimous on this point. Some studies argue that there has been no significant correlation between the reporting of individual cases and the actual number of suicides over a given period.

2. The Hong Kong Journalists Association has compared the way overseas news organizations cover suicides. In the United States and Canada, journalists have agreed generally among themselves not to report individual cases. Instead, they focus on general suicide trends and the reasons for such trends. However, they have agreed to report suicides which involve a celebrity or which have a significant impact on the public. In many other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, there are no specific rules on the reporting of individual cases, except that news organizations normally exercise a certain degree of self-restraint and try to avoid creating any "copy-cat" effect.

3. The HKJA believes that a total ban on the coverage of individual suicides is not appropriate in Hong Kong. However, journalists should seek to strike a balance between the need to report news and the danger of creating a "copy-cat" effect.

4. Editors and reporters should in particular be aware of the impact that stories about suicides might have on the vulnerable. They should be aware of the following:

- ◆ Certain sensationalists ways of describing suicide in the news contribute to copy-cat cases;
- ◆ Inadvertent romanticization of suicides may encourage others to identify with a victim; and
- ◆ Reporting of detailed suicide methods can encourage vulnerable individuals to imitate these methods.

5. In dealing with suicides, the HKJA recommends that the press should follow the principles stated below, unless overriding public interest is involved:

- ◆ Journalists should adopt a low-key approach in handling suicide news. They should consider placing such stories on the inside pages of newspapers, and in less prominent positions in radio and television news bulletins, if such stories are used at all, given the significant influence the electronic media have on public attitudes.
- ◆ They should avoid a detailed description of the suicide method.
- ◆ The media should avoid giving a false impression, in particular to youngsters, that suicide is away to become famous. The use of a victim's full name and photograph is therefore discouraged.
- ◆ The media should respect the privacy of family members and avoid imposing on the grief of those affected.
- ◆ Since there are many complicated reasons for suicides, journalists should avoid simplicity and blaming any party for a particular case. Of greater importance, the media should devote more space to coverage of suicide trends and ways to remedy problems related to such trends.
- ◆ When reporting individual cases, newspapers should consider publishing information about organizations and counseling services, which may prevent suicides. These include the Samaritans and other voluntary agencies.

6. In covering suicide stories, journalists should be aware that the media can play a powerful role in educating the public about suicide prevention. Stories about suicide can inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, warning signs, trends in suicide rates, recent treatment advances, and cases where individuals have overcome despair without resorting to suicide.

# Hong Kong News Executives' Association

## "Journalists' Code of Professional Ethics"

1. Journalists should handle news information with an attitude of seeking truth, fairness, objectivity, impartiality and comprehensiveness. Journalists should strive to ensure accuracy of their reports. They should not mislead the public by quoting out of context, distorting facts or twisting original meaning.

2. Whenever proven inaccuracy, misleading facts or figures, or distortion of original meaning occurs, media organizations should provide persons or organizations affected with the earliest opportunity to reply, and corrections should be made promptly.

3. Journalists should not pander to prurience, indecency and sensationalism when reporting news involving violence, sex-related crime or suicide.

4. Journalists should respect the reputation and privacy of individuals. Taking into account solid editorial reasons, journalists should report on the private lives of individuals-who have not given their consent for doing so-only in ways that would not create unnecessary additional damage to the individuals.

- ◆ Privacy of children should be handled with particular care. Media organizations should have solid editorial reasons for reporting on the private lives of children. Journalists should not intrude into the privacy of children solely because of the social or celebrity status of the minors' family members or guardians.
- ◆ News media should have solid editorial reasons for publicizing the behavior and personal data of public officials.
- ◆ Behavior and personal data of public officials that are pertinent to the exercise of their public office are not considered private.

5. Journalists should avoid conflict of interest. Under no circumstance should they be influenced by political, economic and other interests related to themselves, their families or their employers.

- ◆ Journalists should not seek monetary or other advantages from information that they have obtained in the course of discharging their duties; nor should journalists pass the information to others so that the journalists might obtain an indirect advantage.
- ◆ Journalists should not distort facts to appease advertisers or for any other consideration.
- ◆ Journalists should not write or comment on business or other organizational matters in which they have a stake. Journalists should declare their interest should they be assigned to report or comment on matters in which they have an interest.
- ◆ Journalists should not be influenced by external pressure or economic considerations in their reports and commentaries.

6. Journalists should stand up to political pressure or financial inducement and not succumb to self-censorship.

7. Journalists should obtain information, photographs and illustrations through proper means.

8. Journalists in their reportage or commentary should not discriminate or encourage others to discriminate on grounds of age, race, color, creed, religion, place or circumstance of birth, disability, marital status, gender or sexual orientation.

9. Journalists should protect their sources of information.

- ◆ To avoid misleading the public, journalists should strive not to use information provided by anonymous sources.
- ◆ In cases in which anonymity is necessary, extraordinary care must be exercised to ascertain the veracity of information so provided.

10. Journalists should abide by this Code, except in specific circumstances involving public interest, such as:

- ◆ Exposing any unlawful activity, abuse of power, neglect of duty, or other misconduct by an individual or organization;
- ◆ Preventing the public from being misled by statements or actions of individuals or organizations;
- ◆ Preventing a serious threat to public order, the security of Hong Kong, public health and safety.

## **Publisher**

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All names are listed in alphabetical order.

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"Identifying efficient interventions for the prevention of suicidal behaviour is a major task for health authorities. And among those interventions that have demonstrated their effectiveness stands the proper presentation by the media of information related to suicide, either when noticing suicidal deaths of public figures or, in a more educational role, about ways of handling personal difficulties and guidance on how and where to find the help needed in such circumstances."

**Dr J. M. Bertolote**

Coordinator, Management of Mental and Brain Disorders  
Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse  
World Health Organization

"In recent years, the number of local suicide cases has been increasing, and how the media reports those suicide cases has aroused public concern. Researchers assert the correlation between media coverage and suicide. As a responsible media association, the Hong Kong News Executives' Association understands the seriousness of this problem and recognizes our role in the prevention of suicide."

**Ms. May Suk-mei Chan**

Chairperson of the Hong Kong News Executives' Association

"Experts cannot come to a conclusion that media coverage and suicide are absolutely correlated. But it is generally accepted that sensational reporting may lead to the increase of suicides. Journalists have the social responsibility to report suicide cases in an impartial, objective and unsensationalized manner."

**Prof. Yuen-ying Chan**

Director of the Journalism and Media Studies Centre  
The University of Hong Kong

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