National guidelines for media reporting of suicide

Sir,

The guest editorial, “Media matters in suicide – Indian guidelines on suicide reporting,” made interesting reading. We are happy to note that the Press Council of India (PCI) is planning to initiate guidelines for suicide reporting. This is timely, given the known impact of media reporting on suicides.

In this context, we draw the attention of readers to the position statement and guidelines on the subject issued by the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) and published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry in 2014. This succinct guideline, not cited in the editorial, is the first and only national guideline on media reporting of suicide. Although the emphasis in this guideline is on print media, the recommendations can easily be extrapolated to visual and electronic media. The guideline illustrates the power of the media on suicides through both Werther and Papageno effects. With the burgeoning of technology, the widespread use of gadgets, the younger age at first gadget use, and the privacy with which the gadgets may be used, visual and electronic media may have to be targeted the most in the implementation of the guidelines. These media can particularly be of help for suicide prevention using the principles of the Papageno effect.

The guidelines by the PCI emphasize how suicide should not be reported. The IPS guidelines, in addition, give suggestions for positive reporting, such as utilizing the media to create public awareness of mental illness and to de-stigmatize suicide. The IPS guidelines also make explicit recommendations, such as not to publish suicide notes, which are often breached, perhaps to sensationalize news. The IPS guidelines may be more specific to the Indian context vis-a-vis the broad WHO guidelines based on which PCI formulated its guidelines. The IPS guidelines, therefore, complement and supplement the PCI guidelines. The joint efforts of the PCI and the IPS would, therefore, enhance the quality of media reporting of suicide.

It is also noteworthy that the Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College, Thrissur, Kerala, had organized a workshop for journalists in collaboration with mental health professionals and had brought out a 15-item guideline for responsible media reporting of suicide in 2001. A study that was later conducted found that there were modest changes in the reporting style of the media with regard to suicides and attempted suicides, and the changes have persisted over the years. Although there are scattered efforts to create media awareness about suicide reporting under the aegis of the IPS, a consolidated nationwide approach is lacking.

An active collaboration between media personnel (PCI) and psychiatrists (IPS) is urgently needed, as suggested in the editorial, to promote the responsible portrayal of suicide in media and to deter suicides, especially in young and vulnerable individuals.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.
Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

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Submitted: 26-Dec-2019, Revised: 29-Dec-2019, Accepted: 18-Jun-2020, Published: 27-Jul-2020

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|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Website:                  | www.indianjpsychiatry.org |
| DOI:                      | 10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_805_19 |

How to cite this article: Ramadas S, Kuttichira P, Andrade C. National guidelines for media reporting of suicide. Indian J Psychiatry 2020;62:444-5.
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