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Changing Suicide News Reporting in Hong Kong

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Summary of the Impacts

- successfully veer **local media** towards significantly changing their reporting style to be more constructive and responsible.
- influenced the **stakeholders** such as social media and Government bodies to join us in suicide prevention.
- **suicide rate** in Hong Kong has reduced by more than 30% in the period 2003-2015 which exceeds the 10% target in ten years set by the World Health Organization (WHO).

Underpinning Research – Roles & Contextual information

- Our research on media effect started since 2004
- Role of team members in creation of such knowledge:
 - Prof. Yip and Dr. Cheng are the corresponding author or the first author of research
- Contextual information:
 - Both Prof. Yip and Dr. Cheng are active members of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) Media Task Force.
 - Our efforts are concerted with other international colleagues' work and have been adopted in the most updated IASP/WHO Media Recommendations for Suicide Reporting.
 - We were invited to give talks on Preventing helium suicide in 2017 world congress of the IASP and The University of Melbourne

Underpinning Research -

Media effects on suicide

Our studies found local Hong Kong press's usual practices of reporting suicide news was **frequent, selective**, and often **over-simplified** the suicide causes with **stereotypes** [1, 2, 3].

prominent reporting
of celebrity suicide

significantly increase suicide
rates in the short-term [4]

sensational reporting and online
coverage of a new suicide method
(such as charcoal burning)

facilitate rapid spreading of such method
within Hong Kong, as well as from Hong
Kong to other East Asian areas [5].

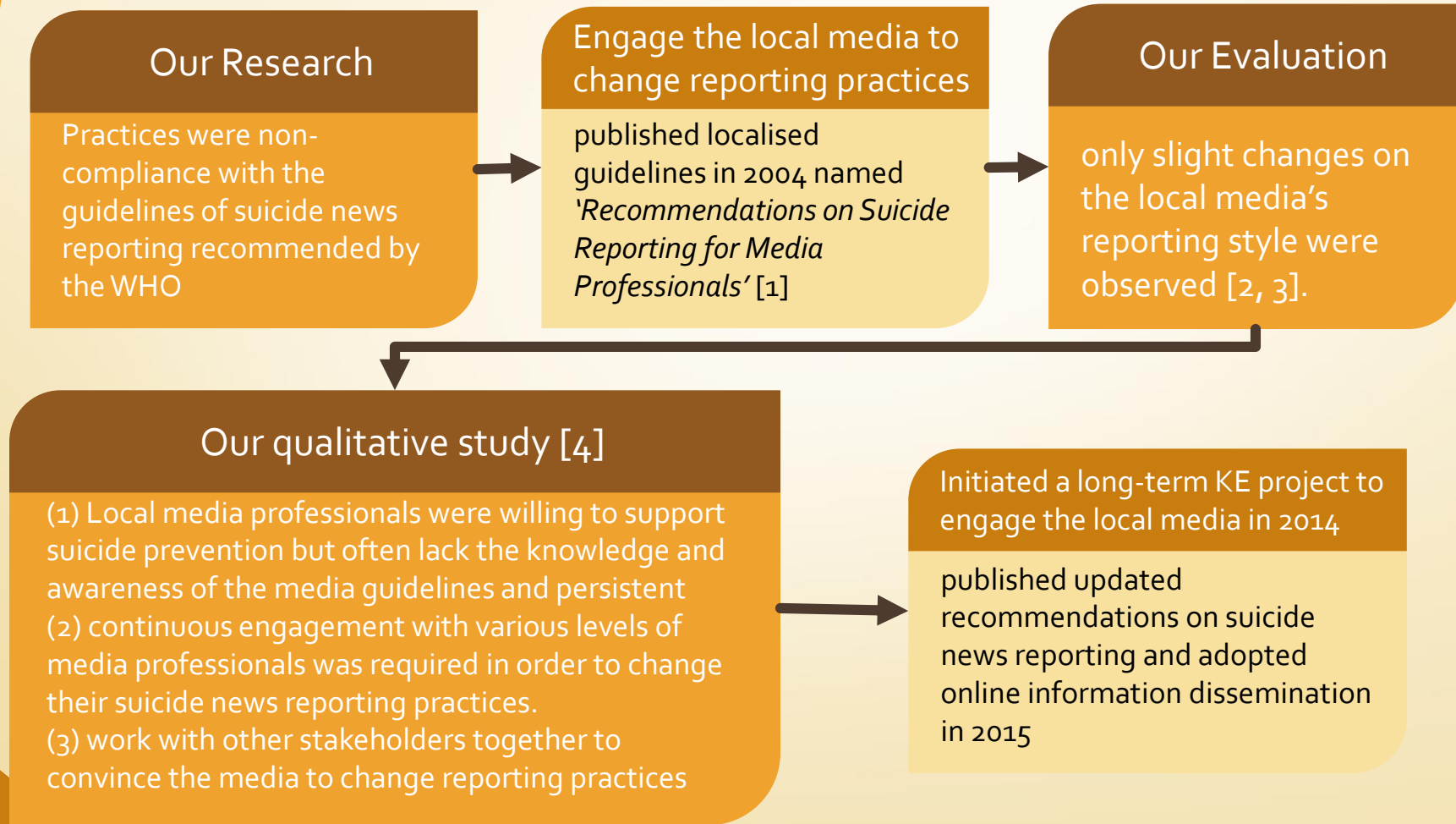
Details reported in suicide news
(regardless of whether the deceased was a
celebrity or used a novel suicide method)

Unlike other countries, media effects in Hong Kong is **far overreaching** & not limited to new suicide method or celebrity suicide but also **extended to other methods of suicide and affected the ordinary people** [6]

1. Au, J. S., Yip, P. S., Chan, C. L., & Law, Y. (2004). Newspaper reporting of suicide cases in Hong Kong. *Crisis*, 25(4), 161-168.
2. Cheng, Q., & Yip, P. S. (2012). Suicide news reporting accuracy and stereotyping in Hong Kong. *Journal of affective disorders*, 141(2), 270-275.
3. Fu, K.-W., Chan, Y.-Y., & Yip, P. S. (2011). Newspaper reporting of suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Guangzhou: compliance with the WHO media guidelines and epidemiological comparisons. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 65(10), 928-933.
4. Niederkrotenthaler, T., Fu, K. W., Yip, P. S., Fong, D. Y., Stack, S., Cheng, Q., & Pirkis, J. (2012). Changes in suicide rates following media reports on celebrity suicide: a meta-analysis. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 66(11), 1037-1042.
5. Chang, S.-S., Chen, Y.-Y., Yip, P. S., Lee, W. J., Hagihara, A., & Gunnell, D. (2014). Regional changes in charcoal-burning suicide rates in east/southeast Asia from 1995 to 2011: A time trend analysis. *PLoS Med*, 11(4), e1001622
6. Cheng, Q., Chen F, Yip, P.S.F. (2017) Media effects on suicide methods: A case study on Hong Kong 1998-2005. *PLOS ONE*, 12(4): e0175580. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175580>

Underpinning Research -

How to effectively engage media professionals regarding suicide news reporting



1. Liang, T. (2004). *Suicide and the Media: Recommendations on Suicide Reporting for Media Professionals*. Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, University of Hong Kong.
2. Cheng, Q., & Yip, P. S. (2012). Suicide news reporting accuracy and stereotyping in Hong Kong. *Journal of affective disorders*, 141(2), 270-275.
3. Fu, K.-W., Chan, Y.-Y., & Yip, P. S. (2011). Newspaper reporting of suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Guangzhou: compliance with the WHO media guidelines and epidemiological comparisons. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 65(10), 928-933.
4. Cheng, Q., Fu, K. W., Caine, E., & Yip, P. S. (2014). Why do we report suicides and how can we facilitate suicide prevention efforts? *Crisis*.

Underpinning Research –

Innovativeness and Significance of research findings

Innovativeness
of our research:

Used advance statistical methods

Identified the unique patterns of media
effects on suicides in Hong Kong [1-6]

Significance of
the knowledge

suicide reporting is strongly correlated
with suicide incidence

1. Au, J. S., Yip, P. S., Chan, C. L., & Law, Y. (2004). Newspaper reporting of suicide cases in Hong Kong. *Crisis*, 25(4), 161-168.
2. Cheng, Q., & Yip, P. S. (2012). Suicide news reporting accuracy and stereotyping in Hong Kong. *Journal of affective disorders*, 141(2), 270-275.
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Engagement (1)

Update of media guidelines

1. Features:

- Localised guideline based on the guidelines of the WHO
- Available in both English and Chinese versions
- Continuously update good and bad examples of real suicide news reports with detailed review comments in the website.
- Provide local community resources
- include recommendations not only for traditional media but also online media



2. Dissemination

- published online (CSRP website and Facebook)



- attached in communications with local media



Engagement (2)

build trust relationship with local media

Had direct contacts

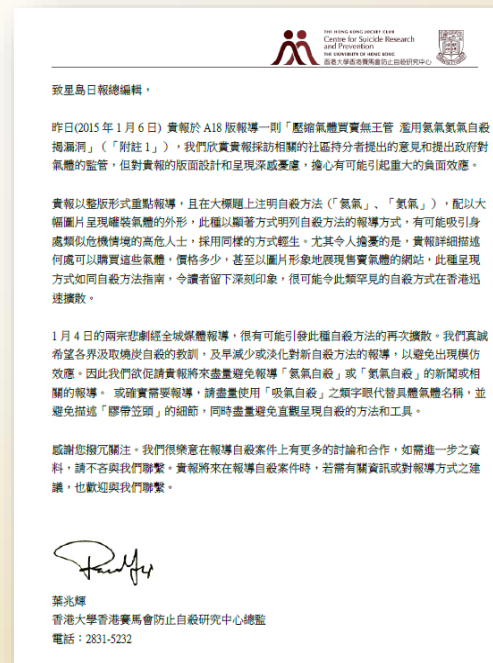
Contacted the Next Media through emails, phone calls, meetings
Paid field visits to both Hong Kong and Taiwan
Apple Daily

Gave continuously reminders

- Sent concern letters and phone calls follow up once we spotted inappropriate suicide news report in our daily monitoring
- From 2014 to 2016, we have sent over 60 concern letters to various media outlet
- Wrote commentaries in local media

- Provided research evidence of media effects on suicide incidents.
- Appealed to their sense of social responsibility

- Gave recommendations on the appropriate way of reporting
- Invited them to enquire experts more when reporting suicide news.



ship with local media

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Impacts Achieved

1. Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting

2. Increasing of responsible news reporting and dissemination

3. Impacts on other stakeholders to support media engagement

(Details explained in the following slides)

Impacts Achieved (1)

Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting



Immediate response of the Chief Executive Officer of the Next Media (the Hong Kong Apple Daily publisher)

- expressed appreciation to our knowledge exchange and was willing to continue cooperate with us to promote suicide prevention: *"I am glad to meet you all yesterday. Thanks a lot to share with us your concerns which are valid. We will take your views in serious considerations when coming across the same kind of news in the future. Please feel free to tell us if you think what we did may cause problem. It is always not our commission but omission..."* [1]
- withdrew a few animation news from their official website that illustrated details of suicide methods [2]



1. Email exchange with Publisher (now the Chief Executive Officer), Apple Daily Hong Kong.
2. 香港首宗氮氣自殺案 情變青年膠袋套頭 吸兩罐氣. (2012, Sept 9). Apple Daily.

Impacts Achieved (1)

Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting



Immediate response of the Chief Executive Officer of the Next Media

- reminded colleagues to be more cautious when reporting suicide news and producing animations [1, 2].
- removed personal information of a HKU student suicide case from their official website

Continuous partnership

- When any suicide occurred, the Apple Daily reporters always make a call to us for comments and we always try to ensure that their reporting to be in a responsible manner.

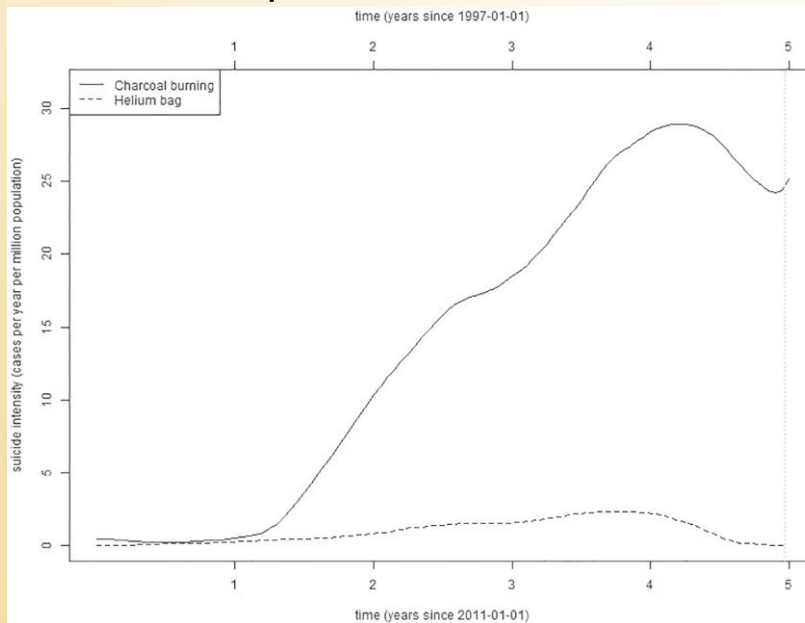


Impacts Achieved (1)

Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting

Overall changes in the reporting styles of the media

- Titles, photos, and content of reports were less sensational and with less personal information of the deceased.



- the intensity of media reporting on helium suicide cases has decreased and less details exposed on this new suicide method after our engagement.

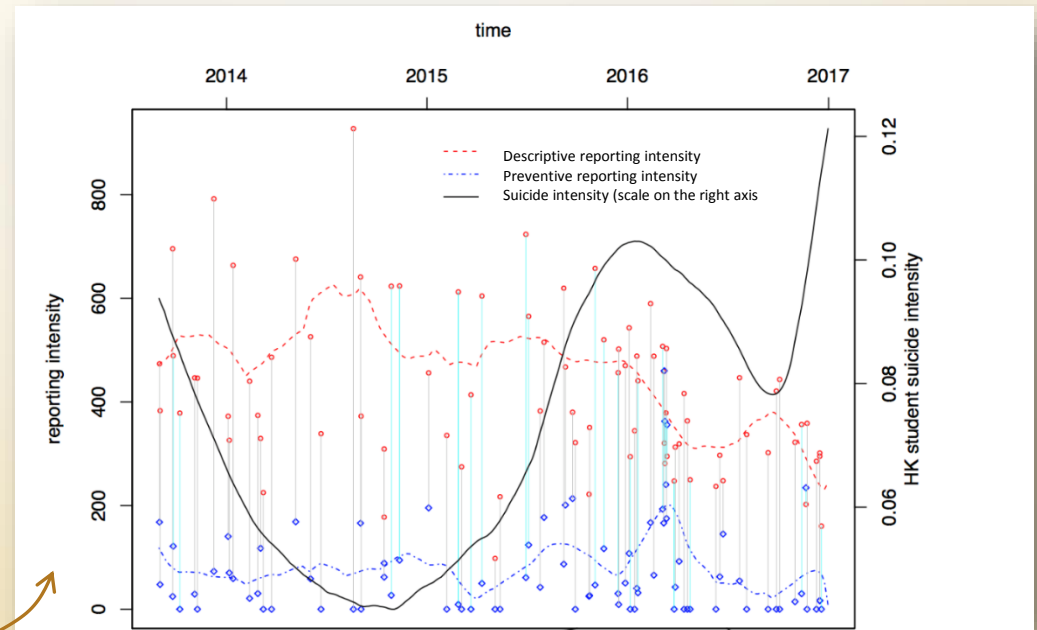
Comparison between the first 5-year spreading trends of charcoal burning suicide and helium suicide in Hong Kong. Data of charcoal burning suicide deaths were provided by the Hong Kong Coroner's Court.

Impacts Achieved (1)

Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting

Overall changes in the reporting styles of the media

- Most local newspapers followed our suggestion to use an implicit term, 'gas', to replace the name 'helium' in their suicide news reports [1, 2].
- the intensity of student suicide news reporting has dropped sharply from 0.1 to below 0.06 per case after our engagement.



Student suicide incidents and news intensities between Sept 1, 2013 and Dec 31, 2016 in Hong Kong.

1. 笠頭、跳樓 1小時兩學生自殺亡。(2014, October 16). Apple Daily. Retrieved from <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20141016/18901641>

2. 學業困擾IVE生笠頭自殺 曾嘆「讀極唔入腦」 社工：非讀書才有前途。(2015, January 5). Mingpao. Retrieved from http://m.mingpao.com/pns/學業困擾%20ive生笠頭自殺-曾嘆「讀極唔入腦」%20社工：非讀書才有前途/web_tc/article/20150105/s00002/1420395122058

Impacts Achieved (1)

Removal and reduction of inappropriate news reporting

Responses of online media to our engagement regarding helium suicides prevention

Table 2. Examples of actions taken by online media outlets and SNS, including potential effect size

Media outlets and SNS	Actions after receiving CSRP letter of concern	Potential effect size (no. of viewers from unique IP addresses on average)
Apple Daily	Removed problematic animation news from their official website.	1,666,860 every day
Google	Removed a blog that contained detailed instructions on helium suicide. Display local suicide prevention hotlines when people search suicide-related keywords in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China.	1.17 billion every month
Baidu	Removed a website archive that contained detailed instruction on helium suicide from their search results. Removed topics relating to helium suicide from their forums. Display local suicide prevention hotlines when people search suicide-related keywords in mainland China.	64,475,433 every day
YouTube	Removed problematic animation news about helium suicide.	Billions every day

Note. CSRP = Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention. SNS = social network service.

Impacts Achieved (2)

Increasing of responsible news reporting and dissemination



encouraged media professionals to proactively contribute to suicide prevention

after being reminded by you, I prohibited suicide news to be appeared as the 'hot topic' in our website and smartphone app, regardless that some news might have been ranked as 'hot topic' by the computer algorithm.

They took our suggestion to produce a preventive animation that encourages parents to provide more support and care to their distressed children, which is viewed 150 million times and received more than 2800 likes on Facebook.



給初中同學&爸媽的話 (2015, March 15). Apple Daily. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/hk.nextmedia/videos/10154207153247448/?__mref=message_bubble



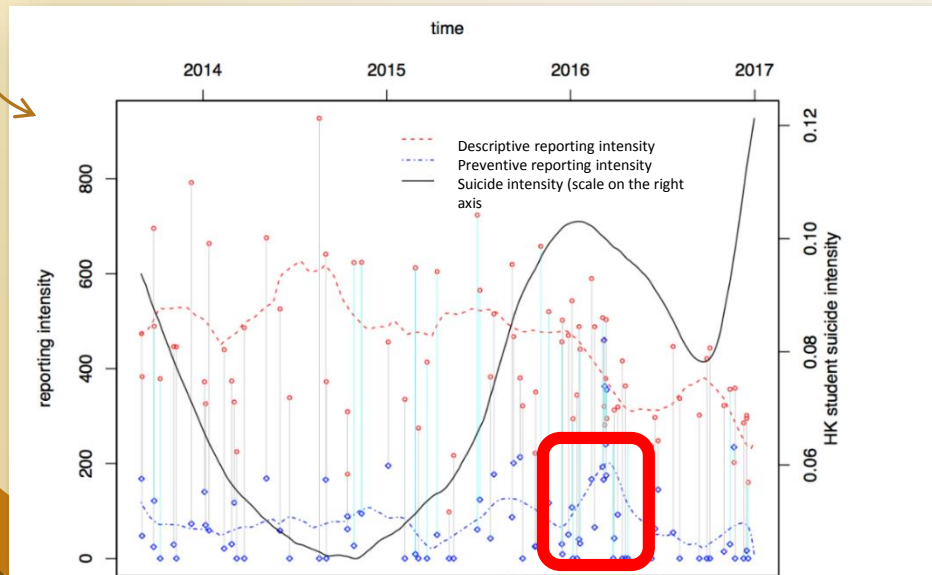
Cheung Kim Hung
CEO of Next Digital Ltd
(Former Chief Editor of Apple Daily Hong Kong)

Impacts Achieved (2)

Increasing of responsible news reporting and dissemination

preventive information increased

In the student suicide incidents in early 2016, we had frequently and intensely engaged the media. Our study found that reporting intensity of preventive information increased from below 0.03 to 0.06 per case after our engagement. Following media practice changes, student suicide incidents intensity also dropped.



Student suicide incidents and news intensities between Sept 1, 2013 and Dec 31, 2016 in Hong Kong.



more positive cases of how people mastered their crises and overcame their life difficulties were reported together with suicide news as a balance.

跳樓重創 須拐杖助行 90後青年悔自殺 盼康復再起步 (2015, May 26). Apple Daily. Retrieved from <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20150526/19160728>

Impacts Achieved (3)

Impacts on other stakeholders to support media engagement

We have engaged other stakeholders to join us in media engagement for suicide prevention.

Restrict the spread of helium suicide method

- We engaged the Fire Service Department and medical doctors as partners.

Table 1. Summary of the actions taken for helium suicide prevention

Actions	Stakeholders involved	Extended manpower involved
Surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (CSRP)– Local media– Hong Kong Police– Hong Kong Coroner's Court– HK Poison Information Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– All 23 HK Police district stations– All coroners from the Coroner's Court– All staff members in HKPIC
Identify risk and protective factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– CSRP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Consultancy provided by international researchers
Develop and evaluate intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– CSRP– Government of HKSAR– Local media and social Networking service (SNS) provider– Hong Kong Press Council (HKPC)– Hong Kong Fire Service Department (FSD)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Chief Secretary Mrs. Carrie Lam– 13 printed newspaper + 3 online news media outlet + 3 SNS providers (i.e., YouTube, Google, Baidu)– Members of HKPC– FSD personnel

Impacts Achieved (3)

Impacts on other stakeholders to support media engagement

We have engaged other stakeholders such as social media and doctors to join us in media engagement for suicide prevention.



Restrict the spread of helium suicide method

- Internet service providers placed suicide prevention hotlines as first search results of suicide related keyword search.
- Doctors provided comments to local media by reminding them of potential copycat effects and emphasizing that helium gas is dangerous and helium suicide is painful, which echoed and reinforced the messages that we have sent out to the media.

Impacts Achieved (3)

Impacts on other stakeholders to support media engagement

- Responding to recent student suicides:
 - Prof. Paul Yip was appointed by the government as the chairman of the Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides
 - Taking his advice, the committee has specifically set up a media sub-group to discuss how we can engage the media to develop student suicide prevention interventions.
 - The committee's final report has included engaging media as one of its long-term suicide prevention recommendations, on which the Education Bureau has promised to follow up.

