Changing Suicide News Reporting in Hong Kong

Team leader: Dr. Qijin Cheng
Team members: Prof. Paul Yip, Ms. Esther Lee, Ms Christine Yeung

HKJC Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention
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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]

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Underpinning Research - How to effectively engage media professionals regarding suicide news reporting

Our Research
Practices were non-compliance with the guidelines of suicide news reporting recommended by the WHO

Engage the local media to change reporting practices
published localised guidelines in 2004 named ‘Recommendations on Suicide Reporting for Media Professionals’ [1]

Our Evaluation
only slight changes on the local media’s reporting style were observed [2, 3].

Our qualitative study [4]
(1) Local media professionals were willing to support suicide prevention but often lack the knowledge and awareness of the media guidelines and persistent (2) continuous engagement with various levels of media professionals was required in order to change their suicide news reporting practices. (3) work with other stakeholders together to convince the media to change reporting practices

Initiated a long-term KE project to engage the local media in 2014
published updated recommendations on suicide news reporting and adopted online information dissemination in 2015

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.
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

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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.
Engagement (2)
build trust relationship with local media
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.
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.

2. 學業困擾 IVE生袋笠頭自殺 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/%E6%98%AF%E5%85%A8%E8%87%B3%E5%85%A8%E6%88%91%E5%80%BC%E4%B8%8D%E5%91%8A%E6%9C%89%E8%B4%A2%E6%9C%BA%E7%84%84%E4%BD%9C%E5%91%8A%E6%9C%89%E8%B4%A2%E8%80%85%E7%84%84%E6%88%91%E5%80%BC%E4%B8%8D%E5%91%8A%E6%9C%89%E8%B4%A2%E6%9C%89%E8%B4%A2/20150105/so0002/1420395222058
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

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

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

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.
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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Summary of the actions taken for helium suicide prevention</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
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<td>Surveillance</td>
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<td>Identify risk and protective factors</td>
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<td>Develop and evaluate intervention</td>
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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.