

# Effectiveness of face-to-face briefings to promote uptake of resources around reporting suicide and mental illness

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## **Abstract**

*On the basis of the current evidence about the impact of reporting suicide and mental illness, a number of countries have developed guidelines and resources designed to encourage responsible and sensitive reporting by news journalists and other editorial staff. However, these resources have generally not been implemented optimally, with the primary dissemination strategy being a mail-out of the resources. In addition, there has been little evaluation internationally of the extent to which media guidelines have been embraced by journalists. In Australia, the Hunter Institute of Mental Health has supported media organisations in their understanding and use of the guidelines by conducting face-to-face briefings with print and broadcast media organisations across the country. The purpose of these sessions is to engage journalists in a discussion about key complexities and challenges in covering these issues and to promote available resources. This paper uses evaluation data to examine the effectiveness of this strategy, highlighting quantitative and qualitative data that indicate awareness of, support for and uptake of the resources by media professionals in Australia.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been a great deal of international interest in the reporting of suicide and mental illness and the potential impact on community behaviour (for example, Huang & Priebe, 2003; Wahl, 2003; Corrigan et al, 2005; Sudak & Sudak, 2005; Pirkis et al, 2006; Romer, Jamieson & Jamieson,

2006). An increase in rates of suicide following newspaper and television coverage of suicide has been found in a number of national and international studies. Some of these studies have also found a higher rate of suicide by a particular method where that method has been described in a media report (for example, Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Etzersdorfer, Voracek & Sonneck, 2004; Tousignant et al, 2005). In addition, an investigation of the literature on the portrayal of mental health and illness in the media has revealed that mental illness tends to be portrayed negatively in the mass media in both news and entertainment (Francis et al, 2001). Further, studies of community attitudes have found that many participants considered the media to have an impact on their attitudes toward mental health and illness (for example, Granello, Pauley & Carmichael, 1999; Lopez, 1991), and those who cited the media as their most important source of information and beliefs tended to have more negative attitudes toward mental illness (Granello et al, 1999; Granello, Pauley & Carmichael, 2000; Philo, 1996).

On the basis of the current evidence about the impact of reporting suicide and mental illness, a number of countries have developed guidelines and resources for media reporting designed to encourage responsible and sensitive reporting among news journalists and other editorial staff. There has been little evaluation internationally, however, of the extent to which media guidelines have been embraced by and have changed the practice of journalists (Goldsmith et al, 2002). In Australia, an attempt has been made to influence media coverage of suicide and mental illness through the nationally funded and coordinated Mindframe Media Initiative. While smaller projects and individual organisations in Australia may be working to promote responsible reporting of suicide and mental illness through a variety of means, projects under the National Mindframe Initiative are recognised as the major contributors to this area in Australia and as providing leadership and guidance to other projects and organisations. The Initiative includes a number of projects which have focused on helping to build the evidence base for this work (Media Monitoring Project), providing resources and education opportunities for media professionals (Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project), facilitating the inclusion of these issues in tertiary journalism education (Response Ability project), providing resources for people in the mental health sector (Mindframe for the Mental Health Sector) and supporting a community action site (SANE Australia's StigmaWatch program).

In June 2002, the Australian Government funded the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project (MMMHP) to further develop resources for media professionals and actively disseminate the resources to ensure a high level of penetration, acceptance and usage. Based on consultations with media professionals, new resources were developed, including a booklet called *Reporting suicide and mental illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006) with accompanying quick reference cards and a website at <http://www.mindframe-media.info>.

A number of strategies were implemented to promote and encourage uptake of the resources, including the provision of face-to-face briefings with media professionals, providing an opportunity for discussion and professional development around these issues. It is these strategies that are of particular relevance to this paper.

Between February 2004 and December 2005, 96 promotional visits were conducted with media organisations across Australia, in the form of either a 30-45 minute drop-in visit with the chief of staff, news director or a senior staff member, or a longer one or two hour briefing session involving a number of staff. These briefing sessions generally gave an overview of current facts and statistics related to suicide and mental illness, provided an outline of the research evidence around reporting suicide and mental illness and offered a number of “issues to consider” for further discussion and debate among staff using media examples to facilitate this discussion. The sessions were facilitated by the MMMHP Program Manager, who has a mental health background rather than a journalism background, and were designed to be interactive rather than prescriptive.

## **Method**

1. Semi-structured interviews with 66 journalists from organisations that received a media briefing in 2004 or 2005.

This aspect of the evaluation sought to assess the impact of two dissemination approaches in terms of awareness of the Mindframe resources and website. The sampling method involved a cold-call to media organisations that had received a briefing or drop-in visit between February 2004 and October 2005. The caller asked to speak to a staff member (journalist, editor, programmer or chief of staff) in the newsroom. In an attempt to assess general awareness of the resources in these organisations, the person interviewed may or may not have been present at the visit by project staff.

Data were collected from 66 (out of a possible 76) media organisations. The remaining organisations were excluded from the evaluation either because they occurred with a group of journalists from a number of media organisations or because a staff member was unable to complete the interview within the given timeframe.

Telephone interviews were conducted in August 2004, February 2005 and December 2005. Interviews lasted between five and 10 minutes, and participants were asked if they were aware of any of the Mindframe resources, whether they had been present at the briefing session, whether they had reviewed or used the resources and whether they considered the resources useful. The content of interviews was recorded on a proforma sheet and later collated for analysis, generating quantitative data.

2. Interviews with 12 media professionals who had coordinated and attended briefing sessions in 2004 or 2005.

In April 2006, the MMMHP team attempted to build on quantitative evaluations between 2004 and 2005 about the usefulness of face-to-face media briefings in promoting awareness and use of Mindframe resources, by conducting qualitative interviews with key informants. These key informants had been responsible for coordinating a briefing session within the previous 24 months and also attended the session. A pool of 16 potential participants was identified, from which 12 interviews were conducted, representing 75 per cent of the sample. Those not interviewed were either on leave or no longer worked at the organisation where the briefing session had occurred. Respondents were split evenly between print and broadcast media and represented both metropolitan and rural organisations.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes, and participants were asked to comment on their impressions of the session, aspects of the session that worked well, suggestions for improvement, any noticeable changes in practice after the briefing session, utilisation of the resources and any suggestions about future activities. Interviews were transcribed and analysed for key themes.

## **Results**

### **1. Interviews with media professionals**

At two to four months following a visit to a media organisation there was 54 per cent recall of the printed resources and 41 per cent recall of the website for organisations that had a drop-in visit. For organisations that had had a full media briefing with a group of journalists, 60 per cent of interviewees recalled the printed resources and 80 per cent recalled the website. This is despite the fact that almost 80 per cent of the respondents in the sample had not attended the face-to-face meeting or briefing that occurred at their organisation, indicating that some process of dissemination had occurred within the organisation beyond those attending the session (see Table 1).

There was no statistically significant difference between drop-in visit or briefing session for increasing awareness of the printed resources. Conducting a briefing session with a group of journalists did, however, significantly increase awareness of the Mindframe website ( $X^2=5.55$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Only a limited number of printed resources were given to each organisation for further distribution, while sufficient numbers of business cards advertising the website were provided.

**Table 1: Awareness of project resources**

	<b>Drop-in visit (n=41)</b>	<b>Briefing session (n=25)</b>
Awareness of resource book	54 per cent	60 per cent
Awareness of website	41 per cent	80 per cent ( <i>sig</i> )
Attended face-to-face meeting	12 per cent	36 per cent

For those respondents who were aware of the resources, 50 per cent of those from organisations that had received a drop-in visit and 79 per cent of those from organisations that had received a briefing session had reviewed the resource book in some detail (see Table 2). Fewer respondents from both groups had reviewed the website. Conducting a briefing session appears to significantly increase usage of the resource, with less than 10 per cent in the drop-in group and almost 50 per cent in the briefing group indicating they had used the resources ( $X^2=6.84$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

**Table 2: Use of project resources by those who were aware of them**

	<b>Drop-in visit (n=22)</b>	<b>Briefing session (n=14)</b>
Review of resource book	50 per cent	79 per cent
Review of website	5 per cent	14 per cent
Use of resources	9 per cent	47 per cent ( <i>sig</i> )

Despite some differences in awareness and usage of the resources, almost all respondents indicated they would use the resources in the future (97 per cent) and 68 per cent of respondents rated the resources as “very useful”, while the remaining 32 per cent rated them as at least “moderately useful”.

## 2. Interviews with key informants

A number of relevant issues and themes were raised in interviews with media professionals (as summarised briefly in Skehan et al, 2006) who had arranged and participated in a media briefing during 2004 or 2005. Analysis of responses from key informants indicated general support for the face-to-face briefing strategy as a means of engaging journalists within their organisations. Comments indicated that the project resources are valued and used by media professionals who have had an opportunity to discuss relevant issues with the project team and may have contributed to some anecdotal changes in practice.

**The overall impressions of the media briefings were very positive.** When asked about their overall impressions of the briefing session, participants generally noted that the session was very useful in that it highlighted and clarified a number of issues they believed were important for journalists to consider.

I think it was significant and important that the media receive some help and guidelines in reporting suicide.

It sort of exposed a few issues which you don't sit down and talk about formally, like certainly we hadn't done in the office anyway. Its focus and attention on something made us think a bit more about some of the issues.

I think everyone, right through from management down, needs to see the course and the information.

Several respondents spoke of the benefits in terms of the session's content being in line with the sensitivities of their audience.

It's something that our listeners are sensitive to, of course. You know, the sensibility of listeners is something that is always a consideration.

I think here at [our station] it is an area that we have always been particularly sensitive about ...

**Respondents indicated they felt that other staff who had participated in the session also viewed it in a positive light, but that for some people there was a natural conflict of interest between the key messages presented and journalistic practice.** Generally speaking, respondents reported that they thought other staff had been willing to take on board the suggestions discussed in the session.

We had our senior staff present for the briefing, and once again I would say it was very relevant to what we do with our business. It's becoming increasingly more of a topic that we have to deal with, so it was good to have it explained to us.

I do remember that it was very well received by all the journalists – I think they all took it on board and it made them all think a little more carefully about the stories they were writing.

In several cases it was noted that some of the individuals who had attended had differing views on the appropriate reporting of suicide and mental illness. They perceived a conflict between some of the issues presented and free speech. It was noted, however, that it is important to continue raising these issues with journalists as this may change thought processes even in cases where a journalist or editor may choose to “do something that people in the mental health industry disagree with”.

I think it doesn't mean to say that newspaper editors or newspapers aren't going to occasionally do something that people in the mental health industry disagree with. So it's something that you need to chip away at, and I think a lot of it depends on who you've got as an editor at the time, which changes from time to time when that personnel changes.

I just think it's certainly a difficult area of reporting, and I think it's something where there can be a natural conflict between what the industry and health professionals want, and what newspapers think they should deliver – you know, free speech or public interest. So it's certainly a difficult area, but it's something that we just have to be conscious of all the time and we have to be prepared to discuss and listen to people from all areas.

**Several aspects of the briefing session were identified as 'working well' in communicating the key issues.** The media examples used in the briefing sessions were identified as a useful tool that made the issues more relevant and provided a practical way to highlight key points. This allows the participants to make the connection between the 'issues to consider' and their everyday work practices.

The fact that she had examples of newspapers, and she didn't tell us what was wrong. She used them and said have a look at this, and people could tell, you know – it was their end of business so it's easy for them to tell. She could provide examples of actual newspapers, she could prove what she was talking about – you know, those kind of concrete examples I think work best.

Several of the respondents also noted that the presentation was of a high quality "well presented ... and very professional". Respondents indicated how important the presenter's communication style was in outlining the key issues to the participants in a way that engaged them and kept their interest.

I do remember that the information was very clearly laid out, was good quality information that was presented very well, and the journalists took it on board very easily.

It was quite pleasing to see the Mindframe people [using] a carefully considered push to change attitudes within the community.

Several other respondents were positive about the face-to-face nature of the session. Many commented that "it is good to have somebody from outside come in and give you a fresh perspective". The face-to-face opportunity was a key issue for organisations in rural and remote areas, who do not often have outside professionals delivering information to their staff in such a format.

It's the outside bodies coming in, it's the getting the attention, it's having the examples, it's a new person talking to them ... it's all those kinds of benefits for us.

I can't reiterate enough, especially in remote and regional areas, to have someone deliver information to you face-to-face is something really quite valuable.

One of the respondents also highlighted the benefit of participating in a group discussion as part of the presentation, which allowed an open forum for raising questions and even debate within the group.

And the other was the discussion at the end – the open discussion after the formal presentation where journalists could put their specific community-related issues of reporting suicide and mental health issues to her [the presenter].

**The majority of respondents thought there had been some change in their organisation that could be attributed to the session.** Respondents commonly noted that the attitudes of staff had changed to some degree after being presented with the information in the briefing session, so they now “think” more about the story. In addition, it may have improved journalists’ and editors’ confidence to cover these issues.

Rather than just churning the story out, it did have an effect on them when they stopped and thought a little more carefully about whether a story should be running in the first place, and if it was to be run, how it should be approached.

I think the awareness factor has been sparked. So in many cases now, or when these cases arise, we are a bit more sympathetic, or a bit more understanding should I say, of how they should be treated.

I hear them raised in an editorial context here amongst journalists and program managers who are looking after the output ... Whereas before, I think they didn't.

For many of the organisations that the project visited, staff had not previously been exposed to these issues. As such, the session raised awareness of the sensitivities involved for these staff.

The power of the information that day was that strong that journalists definitely went away with more awareness of things they need to avoid with their writing in the future. And because of the disparity in what people know about mental health and what the research shows, our people have taken that away and definitely have stopped writing the word “crazy”.

Where organisations were already largely aware of the sensitivities, respondents felt the session consolidated this knowledge, contributed to greater consistency in their practice, and reinforced their current approaches.

I think it's a little bit more consistent in some of the things that we did, but perhaps didn't do all the time. Providing phone



numbers, providing websites at the bottom of stories, using terminology a little bit more carefully.

A couple of the respondents made the point that real “change” is something that might be expected to happen over time with continued reinforcement.

I think that ultimately the more you educate the younger people, then over time attitudes and entrenched views that are held at a higher editorial level are going to change.

Most of the people who have been to these sessions are usually junior people, cadets and junior reporters. Those sorts of things probably have a more immediate effect when they are doing reports, and they appear in the newspaper. Now, as far as editorial decisions goes ... I think it's a long-term strategy. The more people you get to think about and know about the [issues] they are reporting on the better.

**All respondents reported that it is good to make the resources available to journalists, with many confident that they are being used.** Being able to leave the resource book and quick reference cards for staff to use was described as valuable. As indicated in the quantitative data presented in this paper, leaving resources after a briefing session does result in general awareness and use of those resources.

I think [the resource book's] certainly been a useful thing because it's basically so clear. It's not something that is a million miles long and it's something that most of the reporters have been able to keep by them. And it also gives them lists of contacts and all that sort of thing ...

The majority of respondents felt that the resources were being put to good use in their organisations, particularly the quick reference cards that were either made available to all staff or located in a central area.

Absolutely. Following the briefing we had, we distributed the booklet and the quick reference cards to reporters for reading and passing on. And I have still seen them in the office on people's desks, and also we have them as a reference guide with our producers and our chief of staff.

Every new journalist that came into the newsroom was given those guides to read, and the brief [QRCs] were pinned on the notice board, and they were there all the time.

Some respondents were not really sure if the resources were being used, but did imagine that they would be in the right circumstance.

I'd say they are used. We don't actually do a lot of mental health or suicide reporting, probably because of the uncertainty around what you can and can't write. I would say these tools are definitely very helpful for our reporters going forward with things when they do come across a story like this. They store them away and they definitely do use them.

Look, I couldn't guarantee that, but people take the cards particularly and are very interested in having personal copies of those because I assume they want to use them.

## Discussion

Efforts have been made in Australia not only to develop resources for media professionals on reporting suicide and mental illness, but also to actively disseminate and promote uptake of these resources. This has principally been achieved by engaging face-to-face with relevant sectors of the media, along with other strategies such as targeted mail-outs, conference involvement and working with peak organisations about codes of practice.

Overall, the evaluation results indicate a substantial awareness and use of the Mindframe resources within media organisations across the life of the project, as well as consistent agreement about the usefulness of the resources and face-to-face briefing opportunities. Over half of the media professionals working in organisations surveyed were familiar with the resource *Reporting suicide and mental illness*. Given that the majority of respondents had not attended the promotional visit at their organisation, results indicate some dissemination within the organisation beyond those who attended the drop-in visit or briefing session. Across all three evaluation time-points, all participants indicated that the resources were useful to some degree, and all but one indicated that they would use the resources in the future.

General impressions of the media briefings provided in 2004-2005 were overwhelmingly positive in nature. Speaking on behalf of the other staff who had attended the session, respondents felt most people would consider the session a very worthwhile exercise which was both informative and interesting. It appears the briefings succeeded in raising awareness of a number of reporting issues that may not have been considered beforehand, while also improving the participants' understanding of suicide and mental illness. For a minority of the participants, there was a concern that some of the information presented was merely supporting "political correctness", or was in conflict with "free speech". Despite these sentiments, those staff members were happy to participate in the session and took into consideration the perspective provided by the facilitator. Most respondents reported that they thought there had been some change in their organisation that could be attributed to the session. In general, these

changes were related to improved attitudes and confidence among staff around reporting suicide and mental illness and improved awareness of the key issues to consider.

Overall, this evaluation indicated that briefing sessions were viewed in a very positive light and lends great support to continuation of this strategy in Australia and perhaps the provision of similar sessions internationally. While it was duly noted that there will always be some journalists who feel free speech should override any sensitivities, for the majority of participants it appears that the session was a positive experience which, at the very least, gave them an understanding of key considerations. A challenge for the MMMHP in the future will be how to continue to provide high-quality briefings and annual or bi-annual follow-up sessions to all media organisations in both metropolitan and rural areas.

One way to ensure continued follow-up across Australia might be to build the capacity of people in the mental health sector at a local level to work with their media. Respondents in the qualitative interviews actually commented that it would be useful if the project could somehow assist in strengthening the relationship between the media and their local mental health services.

Put [us] in better contact with local resources. Obviously we have a hospital in our area. It may affect them – we should probably do some more about contacting them about mental health reporting, but I don't think that has been done. So perhaps when the briefings are done, she [the presenter] could also be in contact with the local health services and let them know what they [the media] have done. And maybe have better contact with them in the future. So when the person has gone away and the project has gone away, especially from our area – we are left with the local health service. Maybe it could be continued through them.

At the time the interviews were conducted with key informants, new resources for the mental health sector were in the final stages of production as part of new strategies devoted to Mindframe for the Mental Health Sector. While the MMMHP has attempted to provide ad hoc assistance in linking local mental health services and media organisations in some areas, this has not been done in a targeted manner. This observation does reflect a current awareness that communication between the media and the mental health sector needs to be strengthened if reporting of suicide and mental illness is to be balanced and accurate. While there may be a continued role for Mindframe nationally, another challenge facing the Initiative in Australia might be how to develop effective local support for this work in a sustainable way.

Finally, it is important to note that while there appears to be evidence in Australia about the uptake and use of media resources on *Reporting suicide and*

*mental illness*, little is known about whether use of these resources has any short-term or long-term effect on reporting of these issues. A six-year follow-up of data in Australia on the nature and extent of reporting, under the Media Monitoring Project 2006-2007 will provide some insight into whether the nature, extent and quality of reporting in Australia has changed since the first Media Monitoring Project was completed in 2001 (Pirkis et al, 2001). Although the follow-up project may fall short of providing insight into whether use of resources developed under the National Mindframe Initiative have contributed to any of these changes, it is hoped it will provide some evidence to support national efforts in this area by both the media and mental health sectors.

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