

Mindframe brief update 2012: Media reporting on suicide method and location

This briefing report is aimed at providing up-to-date evidence-base information for *Mindframe* stakeholders that may assist with understanding the international research evidence and current position in Australia, related to news reporting of method and/or location of death by suicide.

Information has been grouped into:

- 1. *Mindframe* advice to journalists;**
- 2. Australian media codes of practice;**
- 3. Current research evidence.**

1. *Mindframe* advice to journalists

Mindframe provides the following advice to journalists when reporting on method and location (taken from *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness: A Resource for Media Professionals*) based on the international evidence-research base. While in most instances, 'hotspots' are covered under the *location* provisions (and mentioned specifically), given that suicidal acts occurring at hotspots also tend to use the same method (e.g. jumping from a height, jumping in front of a train) both *method* and *location* are important.

Method of suicide

- Avoid explicit or technical details when reporting the method of suicide as a detailed description of the method can prompt some vulnerable people to imitate the act;
- Discuss the method in general terms only. For example, use 'cocktail of drugs' instead of describing the specific type and number of medications taken. Particular care should be considered when members of the public have easy access to the method described;
- Particular caution should exercise when reporting a method that may be unusual. Research indicates that others may start to use that means of taking their own life following media reports.

Location of suicide

- Media reports of locations used for suicide may result in these places becoming more common for suicide attempts or deaths. Particular care should be taken not to further promote these locations as 'suicide spots' or 'hotspots' where possible.

For further information on issues to consider when reporting suicide, please visit: <http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-suicide>

2. Media Codes of Practice in Australia

To highlight the respect for the international evidence and the suggestions from the *Mindframe* National Media Initiative, all Australian media have made reference to reporting method and/or location in their codes of practice.

The table below provides a summary of specific references to reporting *location* and more general references to *details* and *methods* in Australian media codes of practice.

Australian media codes of practice and provisions about location Media code or policy	Relevant provision
Specific references to <i>location</i>	
Australian Press Council	Method and location should not be described in detail unless public interest clearly outweighs the risk, especially if such methods and locations are not well known by the general population.
ABC Editorial Policies	<p>...reporting of suicide may encourage other attempts and the ABC tries not to add to this risk. A step-by-step description can prompt vulnerable people to act. If reported at all, suicides should be described in moderate terms and should avoid graphic details of method and location, particularly when the method is unusual...</p> <p>...Coverage of celebrity suicide can glamorise or prompt imitation suicide, therefore avoid detailed descriptions of method and location...</p>
Community Broadcasting Association of Australia (CBA)	...In particular, broadcast material should not provide explicit details about the method and/or location of a suicide attempt or death...

General references to <i>details or methods</i>	
FreeTV Australia	... should exclude any detailed description of the method used. The report must be straightforward and must not include graphic details or images...
Commercial Radio Australia	...excluding detailed descriptions about method of suicide.
Special Broadcasting Services (SBS)	Care should be taken to avoid describing or showing methods of suicide in any great detail. Program makers should be alert to the dangers of making such behaviour attractive to the vulnerable. Where methods are described, program makers should have regard to context and editorial requirements.
Australian Subscription Television and Radio Association (ASTRA)	...will exclude any detailed description the method used and any graphic details...

3. Current research evidence

Internationally, almost **100 international studies** have been conducted looking at the link between media portrayals of suicide and suicidal behaviour. There is continued strong support for the relationship between media reporting and increases in completed and attempted suicide rates. For a full review of the evidence see <http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-suicide/evidence-and-research>

Evidence related to reductions of deaths at a particular site following guidelines:

- **Niederkrontenthaler & Sonneck (2007)** specifically looked at the effectiveness of reducing media reporting in relation to a particular site (Vienna subway deaths). A reduction in specific reporting about subway deaths was accompanied by a 75% decrease in the rate of subway suicides and a 20% decrease in the overall suicide rate (generally maintained for the 5 year period the guidelines were introduced).

Selected evidence in relation to method and/or location of death:

- In Hong Kong, Lee and colleagues (Chan, Lee, & Yip, 2003; Lee, Chan, Lee, Tin, & Yip, 2002) observed in 1998 a woman took her own life by burning charcoal. Prior to this, no suicides by this method had been recorded. Media interest led to both newspapers and television providing graphic images. In the subsequent month, there were nine more deaths by this method and, within a year, it had become the most common method in Hong Kong. In a subsequent study by Chan, Yip, Au and Lee (2005), 25 individuals who had attempted suicide by this method indicated that they had learnt of the method from the media.



- Also in Hong Kong Yip, Fu, & Yang (2006) examined press coverage of the suicide of a local singer and actor. Found a significant increase in suicides for males jumping from heights. In 13 cases, his death was specifically mentioned in suicide notes or in the police investigation records.
- Hills (1995), in Australia a local newspaper published a front-page picture of a person jumping from a multi-storey building. Following day, a psychiatric patient threatened the same action.
- Ashton and Donnan (1979; 1981) reported an increase in suicides by burning in England and Wales in the year after a widely publicised political suicide using this method. Likewise, Veysey, Kamanyire and Volans (1999) noted an increase in the number of intentional poisonings by a particular substance reported to the British National Poisons Information Service after the report of an inquest into a suicide by this method was reported in the Independent newspaper.
- In India (Chowdhury, Brahma, Banerjee, & Biswas, 2007) examined the media coverage of a judicial hanging and its sequelae. The authors identified 18 cases of copycat suicide using the same method among children following media reports of the initial event, one suicide and 17 other imitation acts (five of which ended in death).
- In the United Kingdom, Zahl and Hawton (2004) interviewed 12 young people (aged 17-25) who had recently engaged in an episode of self-harm about the influence of media stories (both news reports and fictional depictions) on their actions. The majority reported some effect of at least one story presented in the media, and four reported that the story had been a catalyst in their own self-harm.