

# Newspaper Reports of Suicide: The Impact of Newsworthiness

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## Abstract

***Aim:** To characterize (by age and gender) individuals who suicide (IWS) and their circumstances (presence or absence of mental disorder and stress), as reported in the lay press, and to examine for evidence of newsworthiness impacting on reportage.*

***Method:** Newspaper reports were prospectively collected over a 10 year period (mid 1995 to mid 2005). Age, gender, life circumstances and domicile were extracted, collated and compared.*

***Results:** Sixty one reports of IWS were detected. The average age was 45 years and IWS were predominantly male (83%). Mental disorder was present in 20%, stress in 70% and neither were present in 15%. There was a significant difference between the proportion with stressors and the proportion with mental disorder. In all sub-categories (IWS living outside and inside Tasmania, and IWS whose suicide was preceded and not preceded by the killing of others), stress was more frequently present than was mental illness, although these observed differences did not reach criteria for statistical significance. Comparing the IWS who lived outside Tasmania with those who lived inside the state, those who lived outside were significantly more frequently male (90%, 50%) and less frequently suffered mental disorder (16%, 50%), with statistically non-significant differences in age (46 years, 43 years), and stress (73%, 50%). These differences were more marked when IWS who killed others before themselves were excluded. In addition, there were nine reports of increased suicide rates in particular geographic regions and clusters of suicides in identified groups. The evidence indicated that stress was an important factor in these events. Nine (15%) of IWS were in legal difficulties as perpetrators of child pornography or child sexual offences.*

***Conclusions:** Newsworthiness (prominence, notoriety and domicile of IWS, and the prior killing of others) influenced the newspaper reportage of suicide. Stress was identified as an important suicide trigger (German J Psychiatry 2006;9:97-100).*

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## Introduction

The aim of the study was to characterize (by age and gender) individuals who suicide (IWS) and their circumstances (presence or absence of mental disorder

and stress), as reported in the lay media, and to examine for evidence of newsworthiness impacting on reporting.

Journalists are trained to gather all the available information and to report this in a clear and impartial manner. Australian journalists operate according to the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance Code of Ethics (1996), and are thereby

committed to “honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of others”. They take particular care in reporting suicide (Australian Press Council, 2000) and receive advice to this end (Pirkis & Blood, 2001; National Media and Mental Health Group, 2004).

This study was performed on Tasmania, an island state of Australia. We assumed that the populations of IWS living outside Tasmania (Ex-Tas) and IWS living inside Tasmania (In-Tas) are not different and that any apparent differences would be a function of “newsworthiness”. We have limited evidence to support this assumption, other than the Tasmanian rate being close to (16% above) the national suicide rate (11.1 per 100 000 in 2003) (National Media and Mental Health Group, 2004).

Newsworthiness (which determines newspaper space) of a particular event depends at least to some extent on the geographical proximity of the event and the information consumer. Suicides reported in Tasmania would concern, 1) IWS-Ex-Tas, and 2) IWS-In-Tas). To be newsworthy in Tasmania, the IWS-Ex-Tas could be prominent or notorious individuals who are known outside their domicile, or their act of suicide could have features of interest to the general public. The suicides of the IWS-In-Tas group would be newsworthy, as above, if the IWS was prominent or notorious, because they raise local issues.

Those who kill others before killing themselves may differ from those who kill only themselves, in age, gender and life circumstances, thus, these groups deserve separate consideration.

## Method

Suicide reports were prospectively collected over a 10 year period (mid 1995 to mid 2005) from local newspapers by the first author. Age, gender and life circumstances were extracted, collated and compared by the first and second authors. Life circumstances were categorized according to the presence of mental disorder or stress, or the absence of both. Mental disorder was designated only when the media

reported a confirmed, diagnosed mental disorder. Stress was designated when the IWS was exposed to stressors such as physical illness, loss or conflict with others. Conflict with others represents a stress to all participants, irrespective of the role played (antagonist or otherwise).

Comparative analyses were performed using t-tests for interval variables,  $\chi^2$  for categorical variables from independent samples (with correction for continuity where appropriate), and Cochran's Q for categorical variables from related samples. All comparisons were performed at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

## Results

Sixty one reports of IWS were detected; full details are presented in Table 1 and statistically significant comparisons are presented in Table 2. Age was unavailable for 8 IWS. Three individuals experienced both mental disorder and stress.

Overall, the IWS had an average age of 45 years and were predominantly male (83%). Mental disorder was reported in 20%, stress in 70% and neither were reported in 15%. There was a significant difference between the proportion with stressors and the proportion with mental disorder (Cochran's  $Q=19.61$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

Comparing the total IWS-Ex-Tas group with the total IWS-In-Tas group, the IWS-Ex-Tas group were significantly more frequently male (90%, 50%:  $\chi^2[1, N=61] = 7.14$ ,  $p=0.008$ , with correction for continuity) and significantly less frequently suffered mental disorder (16%, 50%:  $\chi^2[1, N=61] = 4.00$ ,  $p=0.045$ , with correction for continuity), with statistically non-significant differences in age (46 years, 43 years), stress (73%, 50%) and in neither being mentally disordered nor stressed (18%, 0%).

Comparing the sole death IWS-Ex-Tas group with the sole death IWS-In-Tas group, the IWS-Ex-Tas group significantly more frequently male (98%, 45%:  $\chi^2(1, N=42) = 11.93$ ,  $p=0.001$ , with correction for continuity), with statistically non-significant differences in age (53 years, 42 years), mental disorder (16%, 44%), stress (84%, 56%) and in being neither mentally disordered nor stressed (13%, 0%).

Comparing total sole death and total multiple death events, the sole death IWS group were significantly older (49years, 37 years:  $t(48)=2.69$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and significantly more fre-

**Table 1. The age, gender and circumstances of individuals who suicided, grouped according to domicile and whether others were killed prior to the suicide.**

Group	Number IWS	Age years	Gender % male	Mental disorder	Stressed	Unexplained
<b>Total IWS</b>	61	45	83	12 (20%)	43 (70%)	9 (15%)
<b>Total Sole Death</b>	42	49	85	8 (20%)	33 (78%)	4 (10%)
<b>Total Multiple Death</b>	19	37	80	4 (21%)	10 (53%)	5 (26%)
<b>Total IWS-Ex-Tas</b>	51	46	90	8 (16%)	36 (71%)	9 (18%)
<b>IWS-Ex-Tas Sole death</b>	33	53	98	5 (15%)	27 (81%)	4 (13%)
<b>IWS-Ex-Tas Multiple deaths</b>	18	36	78	3 (17%)	10 (56%)	5 (28%)
<b>Total IWS-In-Tas</b>	10	43	50	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0
<b>IWS-In-Tas Sole death</b>	9	42	45	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	0
<b>IWS-In-Tas Multiple deaths</b>	1	52	100	1 (100%)	0	0

quently stressed (78%, 53%:  $\chi^2(1, N=61) = 4.23, p=0.040$ ), and there were statistically non-significant differences in sex (85%, 80% male), mental disorder (20%, 21%), and unexplained deaths (10%, 26%).

There were 9 reports of increased suicide rates in geographic regions, or identified groups who had suicided. 1) An increase in suicide among Japanese businessmen was attributed to poor national economic performance and corporate restructuring. 2) Three Japanese adolescent females suicided following the suicide of "Hide", a rock guitarist of the band "X Japan". 3) Four young adults suicided on the Tiwi Islands, and this was attributed to a desire for a Western lifestyle, alcohol and drug use and a sense of "isolation and desperation". 4) A number of Falun Gong practitioners died by self-immolation in Tiananmen Square, and this was attributed to intolerance of the Chinese government. 5) An increase in suicide of Afghani women was attributed to forced marriages and lack of access to education. 6) An increase in suicide in Uzbekistan was attributed to the "harsh economic climate". 7) Four Iranian exiles died by self-immolation (3 in Paris, 1 in London), and this was attributed to Iranian domestic policies and a clamp down in France on the activities of armed groups. 8) A number of Kurds suicided in Turkey in protest against the trial of the guerilla leader, Ocalan. 9) Four Australian males suicided after being interviewed by police during a national investigation into child pornography. The evidence indicated that stress was an important factor in these events.

In addition to the 4 Australian males mentioned above, who were in trouble over child pornography, 3 other IWS were in trouble as perpetrators and 1 was a victim of child sexual abuse. Five IWS were in gaol (1 on child sex offences) and a sixth was on periodic detention, which was temporarily suspended. A further 14 IWS had been charged, or were about to be charged, with criminal offences (2 on child sex offences). Nine (15%) of IWS were in legal difficulties as perpetrators of child pornography or child sexual offences.

## Discussion

All detected reports were included in the study. Doubtless, some reports went undetected, however, there is no reason to suppose those not detected were any different from those

which were detected.

The accuracy of the designation of circumstances may have shortcomings, first, the journalists may not have detected

mental disorder when present, and second, our extraction of details from the reports may have been faulty. Concern may be raised because psychological autopsies find mental disorder in almost 90% of IWS (Arsenault-Lapierre et al, 2004), while in this report, mental disorder has been identified in only 20%. However, this is not a psychological autopsy.

Australian journalists operate according to a code of ethics. They take particular care in reporting suicide (Australian Press Council, 2000). Journalists look closely for evidence of mental disorder, and are quick to highlight apparent flaws in mental health services. They only report diagnoses when these been substantiated by others. Thus, the lay media will under rather than over report mental disorder. Journalists are cautious about the use of the word depression, and are aware of a difference between dejection and the clinical diagnosis of depression. They also look closely for evidence of stressors, speaking to as many people as possible, and reporting these as comprehensively as newsworthiness and space allow.

Extraction of details from the media reports regarding the presence or otherwise of mental disorder and stress was straightforward, in all but two cases. In these cases parents had killed their children before themselves and the journalists found no explanation. However, after examining the reports we counted these two IWS as suffering a mental disorder. In one other case in which a parent killed her children before herself, because the journalist had investigated thoroughly and were clear there was no evidence of mental disorder, but much stress, we accepted the journalist's view and counted the case as one carrying only stress. We believe our extraction was reasonable and our deviation from the two reports mentioned above would not have had a major impact on the findings.

For an IWS-Ex-Tas to be reported in local Tasmanian newspapers, the IWS would likely be a notorious or prominent person, or the suicide itself would have had newsworthy features. Notorious individuals included "The Granny Killer" who had been in gaol for more than a decade for the serial killing of 6 elderly women, and a scientist who had been in gaol for over a decade for killing his wife, dismembering and flushing her body parts down the toilet. Another was a "millionaire drug baron" who was serving a

**Table 2. Statistically significant results from the comparisons of groups**

Compared groups		Significance
Overall mental disorder (20%)	Overall stress (70%)	Cochran's Q=19.61, p<0.001
IWS-Ex-Tas gender (90% male)	IWS-In-Tas gender (50% male)	$\chi^2(1, N=61) = 7.14, p=0.008^*$
IWS-Ex-Tas mental disorder (16%)	IWS-Ex-Tas mental disorder (50%)	$\chi^2(1, N=61) = 4.00, p=0.045$
IWS-Ex-Tas sole death gender (98% male)	IWS-In-Tas sole death gender (45% male)	$\chi^2(1, N=42) = 11.93, =0.001^*$
Total sole death age (49 years)	Total multiple death age (37 years)	t(48)=2.69, p=0.01
Total sole death stress (78%)	Total multiple death stress (53%)	$\chi^2(1, N=61) = 4.23, p=0.040$

\*applying correction for continuity

30-year gaol sentence and whose escape plan had been foiled. The IWS-Ex-Tas prominent people included leading business figures, established writers, entertainers, sporting identities, a spy and an admiral.

To become prominent and thereby, newsworthy beyond their domicile, individuals need to be highly functional over many years. This is consistent with the IWS-Ex-Tas reported in Tasmanian newspapers trending toward being older than IWS-In-Tas, significantly more often male (greater opportunities) and significantly less often suffering mental disorder.

It is reasonable to expect the local media would find the suicide of local people newsworthy, irrespective of prominence and notoriety. As expected, the total IWS-In-Tas group compared to the total IWS-Ex-Tas group were significantly less often male, and trended toward being younger. Mental disorder was significantly more frequently reported, with a trend for stress to less frequently be reported. As there is no reason to expect that the IWS-In-Tas and IWS-Ex-Tas differ in reality, this evidence indicated that the newsworthy imperative appears to have impacted on reportage.

A weakness of the above argument is that there is little evidence that the IWS-Ex-Tas and the IWS-In-Tas are similar. By the same token, there is little evidence that they are not similar. Tasmania is a prosperous state, the opportunities and employment are similar to those of other states of Australia (the domicile of the majority of the reported IWS-Ex-Tas) and has a suicide rate similar to (16% above) the national average.

Suicides which were newsworthy because of the nature of the act rather than the identity of the individual included that of a man who threw furniture into the street from a 25<sup>th</sup> floor, set fire to his girl-friend's apartment, then his own, and then jumped from a 24<sup>th</sup> floor when the police arrived. Another was the suicide of a former ally of Slobodan Milosevic who, when the Yugoslav parliament agreed to his extradition to the UN war crimes tribunal, walked to the front of the parliament building and shot himself in the head.

Newsworthy features also include suicides which are preceded by the killing of others. Eighteen multiple death sui-

cides occurred outside and 1 inside Tasmania. None of the multiple death IWS were prominent people.

In the total sample of 61 accounts of suicide, stress was identified in 70%. In the nine reports of suicide by collections of people there was also evidence of stress. Taken together this information strongly indicates stress is an important suicide trigger.

The strength of these findings is tempered by the limitations of the sources (observations made by non-clinicians). However, we use the Neuropsychiatric Inventory (Cummings et al, 1994) to evaluate dementia, based on the advice of "care-givers", thus the current observations cannot be summarily discounted.

Media reports of suicide are an important source of information for the lay public. The newsworthiness imperative appears to influence the presented picture. Media reports strongly suggest that stress as an important factor in suicide.

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