

Samaritans' submission to the IMPRESS code review

Samaritans is pleased to make a submission to this review of the IMPRESS Standards Code. We make this based on the most up-to-date research into media reporting of suicide and our experience of working in this area.

Suicide is a major public health concern and therefore a topic which is very much in the public interest. Sensitive reporting can inform and educate the public about suicide and the signs to look out for, highlighting that suicide is preventable and directing people to sources of support. An emerging body of research evidence, known as the 'Papageno' effect, has linked coverage of some types of information about suicide to falls in suicide rates, showing a preventative influence. Coverage that focuses on people seeking help and coming through difficult times serves as a powerful testimony to others that this is possible.

However, suicide is an extremely complex topic that presents a distinct set of challenges for journalists, who must balance reporting on a sensitive issue and informing the public while considering what influence coverage may have on vulnerable people, including the possibility of imitational suicidal behaviour.

Research from across the world has studied what is known as the 'Werther' effect. This research has consistently shown that media reports of suicide are associated with increases in suicide rates.

A recent summary of this research has shown that media reporting about celebrity suicides is associated with an average 13% increase in suicide in the following 1-2 months after the death. To put that in context, the UK currently has around 542 deaths by suicide per month. A 13% increase means there would be an additional 70 deaths per month following media coverage of a celebrity's death.

Certain types of news coverage of suicide, such as reports including explicit details of suicide methods, and coverage which is sensational and excessive, can lead to imitational suicide deaths. Again, the study mentioned above showed that when the media reported on specific suicide methods used by a celebrity, the increase in the number of deaths in the population was higher – an increase of 30%.

Samaritans' Media Advisory team works closely with the press to support responsible and informed coverage of suicide. We know from international research that when media guidelines are followed there is a positive effect on reporting of suicide.

Samaritans' submission to this consultation is based on the most significant areas of risk, demonstrated in the research evidence and data analysis of suicide reporting in the UK over the last decade.

This submission makes three key recommendations:

- to improve and strengthen the public safety element of the code
- to add a new clause around reporting of celebrity and high-profile suicides
- to add a new clause around reports about harmful online materials.

Research references have intentionally been omitted from this submission due to the nature of content, these are available on request.

1. Recommendations to strengthen clause 9

- a) To remove, or replace, the word ‘excessive’ in relation to the level of detail of suicide methods, to reduce the incidence of suicide methods being publicised in news reports, especially in headlines.**

Samaritans, and other leading experts in the study of suicide reporting, believe this term is too broad and leaves too much open to interpretation.

It is rare to see excessive details of suicide methods published in reports, thanks to greater awareness among editors and reporters of the risks.

However, it is extremely concerning, given the substantial international evidence, that descriptions containing sufficient information to clearly illustrate suicide methods are sometimes reported, including in headlines.

Inclusion of suicide methods in headlines has increased in the last five years, which is disappointing in view of journalists’ greater awareness of the risks associated with reporting this topic. This can increase cognitive awareness of specific suicide methods and alter public perception of their effectiveness, contributing to increases in use.

- b) To add an additional point to clause 9 covering novel and highly lethal suicide methods, to ask that no details of the method are included in reports, including reports covering inquests.**

Strong evidence exists which demonstrates how new methods have been introduced and rapidly increased in use in other parts of the world following widespread newspaper reporting. This has resulted in significant growth of these novel methods and increases in suicide rates overall.

Naming a suicide method which is new or relatively unusual in a news report is enough detail to promote the use of this method and risks it becoming more common in the UK, adding to deaths, not substituting for other methods.

Qualitative studies involving interviews with people who have survived suicide attempts, provide additional evidence that people learn about suicide methods from news reports, and that these details influence their perceptions of the accessibility and effectiveness of methods.

If a high profile person were to die by the use of a novel suicide method, the combination of excessive coverage containing details of the suicide method and the increased likelihood of people identifying with the deceased, could have catastrophic implications in terms of the impact on suicide rates.

People who survive a suicide attempt, and most do, get a second chance at seeking help and working towards recovery. Those who choose a highly lethal suicide method will get no second chance.

- c) **To add a further point to clause 9, reminding journalists that sources of support should be included in suicide stories to encourage people, who may be affected by the coverage, to seek help.**

People can be significantly affected by news reports covering sensitive issues, including mental health and suicide.

Due to the associated risk with media coverage and suicide contagion, news articles covering suicide should direct vulnerable audiences to where they can find help.

Coverage that reminds people that suicide is preventable and focuses on help-seeking can have a protective effect by encouraging vulnerable people to reach out for help.

This is an example of how the press can make a significant contribution to helping to reduce suicides. People do contact Samaritans' helpline when the contact details have been included in stories.

2. Recommendation for an additional clause to be added covering reporting of celebrity and high-profile suicides

The likelihood of media coverage influencing imitational suicidal behaviour increases considerably following widespread reporting of celebrity suicides.

For example, in the five months following Robin Williams' suicide in 2014, there were almost 1,800 more suicide deaths in the USA compared to the same time period from the previous year – a 9.85% rise.

This contagious effect is well documented through numerous international studies which have analysed news reports and the corresponding impact on suicide rates. As mentioned earlier, the recently published review of 31 studies examining the impact of suicide reporting found that suicide rates consistently increase by approximately 10 to 18% following widespread reporting of celebrity suicides, and suicides using the same method as the celebrity increased by 30%.

3. Recommendation to add a new clause to avoid signposting people to harmful online content

Greater care must be taken to avoid signposting vulnerable people to harmful content online, including videos showing suicidal behaviour including self-harm, guidebooks and websites which give instructions on suicide methods and promote suicidal behaviour, or any content which glorifies suicidal behaviour in any way.