

# Role of Media Reporting on Suicide

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The theme for World Suicide Prevention Day for 2024-2026 is “Changing the Narrative on Suicide”, aiming to “Start the Conversation”. In light of this, I’ve decided to dedicate the editorial of the September Issue of the Kathmandu University Medical Journal to this important topic.

Suicide is a significant public health issue, with approximately 700,000 individuals dying by suicide globally each year. It is the third leading cause of death among the 15–29 age group. Notably, 73% of global suicides occurred in low- and middle-income countries in 2021. In Nepal, data obtained from the police indicates an average annual increase in suicides over the past five years of 7.2%, which rose to 14% in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

The impact of sensational reporting of suicide, as well as the subsequent increase in suicide rates, was initially studied by Philips, who coined the term “Werther effect”.<sup>2</sup> This term originates from Goethe’s 1774 novel “The Sorrows of Young Werther”, which led to a series of suicides following its release in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Numerous studies worldwide have confirmed the association between reporting individual suicides in the news media and an increase in suicide rates, particularly after the reporting of a celebrity’s suicide. The systematic review and meta-analysis published in 2020 reported a 13% increase in the risk of suicide in the period following the media reporting of a celebrity’s suicide.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the mechanism by which media reporting increases suicide are, repeated reporting of suicide leading to normalization of suicide as an acceptable way to cope with difficulties and detail information on suicide methods, which might influence the choice of suicide method by a person at risk of suicide.

The Werther effect has prompted the development of guidelines for responsible reporting of suicide by the World Health Organization. Responsible media reporting for suicide prevention is one of the four pillars of the World Health Organization’s Live Life suicide prevention framework. In the context of Nepal, there is limited research on newspaper reporting of suicide. A study conducted by Sharma et al. involved content analysis of articles from online archives, focusing on the reporting of suicide deaths in six English language newspapers published in Nepal between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2020.<sup>5</sup> The study found that about 97.6% (n=161) of news articles violated the recommendations provided in the WHO guidelines.<sup>5</sup>

On the flip side, social media can also provide a protective influence. Jerome Motto was the first to show that suicide rates could be decreased by implementing a newspaper blackout, reducing the amount of coverage, or altering the style of media reporting, such as by removing the emotional and sensational aspects of suicidal behaviors.

Studies have indicated that if the media portrays suicide using negative terms such as horrific and painful, it could reduce the likelihood of copycat behavior. For instance, the negative media reports on the Kurt Cobain’s 1994 death.<sup>6</sup>

Media reporting can be a double-edged sword and can have both a risk and a protective factor. We should encourage educative and preventive side of media reporting to reduce the risk of suicide contagion. Collaboration, promotion and implementation of responsible media reporting guidelines between stakeholders is an essential part of any suicide prevention strategy.

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