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Media awards for responsible reporting of suicide: Experiences from Australia, Belgium and Denmark

Andrew J Dare¹, Karl AM Andriessen^{2,3}, Merete Nordentoft⁴, Michella Meier⁴, Annemiek Huisman^{1,5} and Jane E Pirkis^{1*}

Abstract

Background: Media awards to encourage responsible reporting of suicide have been introduced in several countries including Australia, Belgium and Denmark.

Aims: To explore the experiences of Australian, Belgian and Danish award recipients in preparing stories on suicide, and consider the impacts of the award for these recipients and for media professionals more broadly.

Method: Conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with the majority of the recipients of the award in the three countries of interest.

Results: The award is often to show parents as a method of reinforcing national and international media guidelines. The recipients of awards were proud to have had their achievement recognized in this way and the award results heightened awareness of the issues inherent in reporting suicide. Although initially low and prepared subsequent stories on suicide, a number had been given opportunities to give further media coverage and how best to approach this sensitive topic. The award is an important means by which good quality reporting can be rewarded and a springboard for raising community awareness about suicide.

Conclusion: The experience from Australia, Belgium and Denmark suggests that media awards which recognize responsible reporting of suicide are extremely worthwhile.

Introduction

Research has consistently demonstrated that media reporting of suicide can lead to 'spikes' in suicide rates than cannot be explained by other factors [1,2]

and this phenomenon has been termed the 'Wertham effect' [3]. The Wertham effect is named after the American psychologist Fredric Wertham, who in 1954 published a book on the subject [4].

The main response to this has been the development and dissemination of guidelines to encourage responsible reporting among media professionals. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International

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including Australia, Belgium and Denmark - are now offering awards which honour media professionals who report suicide-related issues in an exemplary fashion in print or broadcast media:

Australia's awards have been in place since 2004, and are auspiced by *Suicide Prevention Australia*. The awards recognise media organizations or individuals who 'have assisted or provided effective and accurate delivery of information on suicide and suicide prevention and through that reporting assisted in progressing awareness and suicide prevention' [12].

[REDACTED]

The Belgian Award for Responsible Portrayal of Suicide and Survivors is auspiced by the Flemish Working Group on Suicide Survivors, which was also responsible for developing and disseminating guidelines on the reporting of suicide,

[REDACTED]

In Denmark, the auspicing body for the annual *Werther Award* is the Danish Association for Education and Research in Suicide Prevention.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

To date, there has been no formal exploration of the benefits of such awards.

[REDACTED]

Method

We approached the relevant auspicing bodies in Australia, Belgium and Denmark and asked them to provide us with lists of previous winners of the awards,

[REDACTED]

We then contacted the winners and a member of our team conducted a semi-structured interview with each of them.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

In Australia and Denmark, all interviews were conducted via telephone, recorded, and transcribed. In Belgium, all but one of interviews were also conducted by telephone and recorded and transcribed, and one was conducted via email.

[REDACTED]

English transcripts from all three countries were analysed by the primary author

[REDACTED] These themes were cross-checked with the authors

[REDACTED]



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Abstract

Background: Media awards to encourage responsible reporting of suicide have been introduced in several countries, including Australia, Belgium and Denmark.

Aims: This study aimed to examine the experiences of Australian, Belgian and Danish award recipients in preparing stories on suicide, and consider the impacts of the awards for these recipients and for media professionals more broadly.

Method: We conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with the majority (14 out of 15) of past recipients of the awards in the three countries of interest.

Results: Media awards appear to show promise as a method of reinforcing national and international media guidelines on reporting suicide. The recipients of awards were proud to have had their achievements recognized in this way, and had developed a heightened awareness of the issues inherent in reporting suicide. Although relatively few had prepared subsequent stories on suicide, a number had been given opportunities to provide advice to other media professionals about how best to approach this sensitive topic. Recipients viewed the awards as an important means by which good quality reporting can be rewarded, and a springboard for raising community awareness about suicide.

Conclusion: The experience from Australia, Belgium and Denmark suggests that media awards which recognize responsible reporting of suicide are extremely worthwhile.

Introduction

Research has consistently demonstrated that media reporting of suicide can lead to 'spikes' in suicide rates than cannot be explained by other factors [1,2]. Phillips named this phenomenon the 'Werther effect' in reference to the spate of copycat suicides in Europe that followed the release of a romantic tragedy by Goethe in which the protagonist took his own life [3].

The main response to this has been the development and dissemination of guidelines to encourage responsible reporting among media professionals. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International

Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) have developed international guidelines [4], and government and non-government bodies in many countries have developed national guidelines [5]. These guidelines typically caution media professionals against sensationalizing suicide, giving it undue prominence, and providing explicit details about suicide methods. They are not about censorship, however, and in fact acknowledge the important role the media has in dispelling myths about suicide and providing information about where vulnerable readers or viewers might seek help [5]. Evaluative evidence is mounting that this approach can improve the quality of journalism in this area [6-11].

The production of guidelines is beginning to be complemented by other proactive incentives to encourage responsible reporting. In particular, several countries -

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including Australia, Belgium and Denmark - are now offering awards which honour media professionals who report suicide-related issues in an exemplary fashion in print or broadcast media:

Australia's awards have been in place since 2004, and are auspiced by *Suicide Prevention Australia*. The awards recognise media organizations or individuals who 'have assisted or provided effective and accurate delivery of information on suicide and suicide prevention and through that reporting assisted in progressing awareness and suicide prevention' [12]. The awards are assessed by a judging panel, chaired by a Suicide Prevention Australia Board Member, and consisting of representatives from a range of suicide prevention, mental health and media organisations. The awardees are announced on World Suicide Prevention Day each year. The awards complement Australia's national guidelines on reporting suicide, *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* which were developed by the Department of Health and Ageing [13] and have been disseminated by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health [14].

The *Belgian Award for Responsible Portrayal of Suicide and Survivors* is auspiced by the Flemish Working Group on Suicide Survivors, which was also responsible for developing and disseminating guidelines on the reporting of suicide, *Als Journalist Kan Je Levens Redden [As a Journalist You Can Save Lives]* [15]. The award was launched in 2003 as a part of the Working Group media policy, and has been offered since 2004 [16]. Each year a jury of five members is appointed by the Flemish Working Group on Suicide Survivors, with a suicide survivor as Chair. Other members include a media representative and a suicidologist. Following installation of the jury, the Flemish Working Group on Suicide Survivors makes a public call for nominations, via a press release and announcements on its website and in its monthly e-newsletter. The jury considers nominations against the guidelines on reporting and agrees on a winner. Awards are presented on Suicide Survivor Day, in November of each year. The award and the dissemination of the guidelines were included in the Flemish governmental Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2006-2010.

In Denmark, the auspicing body for the annual *Werther Award* is the Danish Association for Education and Research in Suicide Prevention. The award has been offered since 2005, and is judged by the 'Werther Committee' which comprises representatives from the Danish Association for Education and Research in Suicide Prevention, the Centre for Suicide Research, the Danish Journalists' Union and the Association for Survivors after Suicide. Nominees are invited via a press release, and the committee selects awardees based on nominations received. The winner is announced on World Suicide Prevention Day. The Werther Award promotes the

principles of responsible reporting of suicide outlined in the WHO/IASP guidelines, but Denmark does not have its own national guidelines.

To date, there has been no formal exploration of the benefits of such awards. The current study examined the experiences of Australian, Belgian and Danish award recipients in preparing stories on suicide, and considered the impacts of the awards for these recipients and for media professionals more broadly.

Method

We approached the relevant auspicing bodies in Australia, Belgium and Denmark and asked them to provide us with lists of previous winners of the awards, and a summary of the stories for which the awards were granted.

We then contacted the winners and a member of our team conducted a semi-structured interview with each of them. During these interviews, the winners were asked to respond to a set of questions. Most of these questions were closed-ended, but, depending on the winner's response, the interviewer probed further to explore his or her experiences in more detail. The questions were:

1. You were presented with an award for your story on [describe story]. When you prepared this story, what was your aim?
2. When you prepared this story, were you aware of any guidelines on reporting suicide?
3. Since winning the award, have you prepared any other stories on suicide?
4. Did winning the award make you reflect on how others report on suicide?
5. Has winning the award resulted in your giving advice to others on how to report on suicide?
6. Has winning the award had any other impacts for you?

In Australia and Denmark, all interviews were conducted via telephone, recorded, and transcribed. In Belgium, all but one of interviews were also conducted by telephone and recorded and transcribed, and one was conducted via email. The Australian interviews were conducted and transcribed in English, and the Belgian and Danish interviews were conducted in each country's main language and then translated into English following the transcription phase.

English transcripts from all three countries were analysed by the primary author (AD), in order to explore prominent themes emerging from the interviews. These themes were cross-checked with the authors with overarching responsibility for the Belgian and Danish interviews (KA and MN, respectively) in order to ensure accuracy of interpretation.