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# Reach, Awareness and Uptake of Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness: An Australian Perspective

**Key words:** copycat suicide; stigma; media; guidelines; reporting

## A B S T R A C T

*In recent years there has been international interest in media portrayal of suicide and mental illness and the impact that reporting may have on community understanding, attitudes and behaviour. Many countries have developed guidelines and resources for media reporting to encourage responsible and sensitive coverage. However, there has been little international evaluation of the extent to which journalists have embraced and followed media guidelines. In Australia, the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project has implemented a national dissemination strategy that supports media professionals in their understanding and use of the guidelines. This has been achieved by face-to-face briefings, further resource development, promotional activities and work with peak bodies to implement changes in codes of practice. This paper examines the effectiveness of an active dissemination strategy, highlighting both quantitative and qualitative evaluation data that indicates substantial reach, awareness of, support for and uptake of these resources by media professionals in Australia.*

## Introduction

In recent years there has been international interest in the portrayal of suicide and mental illness in the media (Huang & Priebe, 2003; Wahl, 2003; Corrigan *et al*, 2005; Sudak & Sudak, 2005; Romer *et al*, 2006). Research shows that certain representations of suicide may increase the risk of copycat behaviour among vulnerable people (Pirkis & Blood, 2001; Etzersdorfer *et al*, 2004; Tousignant *et al*, 2005; Pirkis *et al*, 2006b). There is also concern that people living with a mental illness are portrayed predominantly in a negative and stereotypical way (Francis *et al*, 2001), which may increase stigma and discrimination. Suicide and mental illness are topics that journalists are often required to cover. Most members of the media report suicide and mental illness responsibly, but research in Australia has shown that there is still progress to be made (Pirkis *et al*, 2001).

In an attempt to respond to research evidence, a number of countries have developed guidelines that promote responsible reporting of suicide, and, in the Australian context, reporting of both suicide and mental illness. As outlined in Pirkis *et al* (2006a), national and international guidelines on reporting suicide (and mental illness) tend to have similar content, but differ in the way they have been developed and implemented. Implementation of these resources in Australia has differed from that in other countries in that an active dissemination strategy has been funded nationally since June 2002. Through the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project, the Hunter Institute of Mental Health and other partner organisations (including the Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and

Early Intervention for Mental Health – Auseinet – and SANE Australia) have supported media organisations in their understanding of the guidelines, by conducting face-to-face briefings, distributing and promoting the resources and supporting materials, and working with peak regulatory bodies to incorporate aspects of the guidelines into codes of practice and editorial policies (Pirkis *et al*, 2006a).

Given that there has been little evaluation anywhere of the extent to which media guidelines have been embraced by and have changed the practices of journalists (Goldsmith *et al*, 2002), this paper explains the context in which resources have been developed and promoted in Australia. In addition, it presents evaluation data that was designed to assess awareness, uptake and perceived value of project resources and approaches to raise the issue of sensitive reporting with the Australian media.

## Methods

In evaluating the outcomes and achievements of the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project, it was not feasible to assess changes in media reporting directly, although any change will be captured as part of a follow-up media monitoring study to be conducted in Australia between 2006 and 2007. Instead, objectives-based evaluations were implemented over the life of the project to assess reach, awareness and use of project resources, and the value of project strategies. Three evaluation sources are explored here.

### *Quantitative data from the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project Reports*

Four progress reports and two final reports for the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project between January 2004 and May 2006 were retrieved and reviewed. In particular, statistics on the dissemination of project resources, usage of the Mindframe website and documentation of engagement with regulatory bodies and media organisations were analysed.

### *Quantitative data from semi-structured interviews with 135 media professionals from organisations that had varying contact with the project team between 2004 and 2005*

An evaluation was conducted in December 2005, to examine awareness and use of the key Mindframe resources, with a selection of organisations that had not had direct

face-to-face contact with the project team in the previous 12 months. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with a total sample of 135 respondents, which represented a 10% sample of four target groups: respondents from organisations that had received a drop-in visit more than 12 months previously (target group 1; N=32), organisations that had received a full briefing session more than 12 months previously (target group 2; N=18), organisations that had been contacted via a mail-out within the previous 12 months (target group 3; N=16), and organisations where there was no known contact, acting as a ‘control’ group (target group 4; N=69). Responses were obtained from both print and broadcast media in each target group; sixty newspapers, two magazines, fifty-nine radio stations and fourteen television stations made up the total sample.

Interviews were generally five to ten minutes in length. Participants were asked whether they were aware of any of the Mindframe resources, whether they recalled how they became aware of the resources, whether they had reviewed or used the resources, and whether they considered the resources useful. The content of interviews was recorded on a pro-forma sheet and later collated for analysis, generating quantitative data.

### *Qualitative data from interviews with 12 media professionals who had co-ordinated and attended briefing sessions in 2004 or 2005*

In April 2006 the project team attempted to build on previous quantitative evaluations about the usefulness of face-to-face media briefings by conducting qualitative interviews with a number of relevant media professionals. The purpose of the evaluation was to gain more detailed information about how media briefings have been perceived in media organisations, and whether these sessions and the resources have contributed to staff development or any changes in journalistic practice.

The evaluation process involved collection of qualitative data from media professionals who were responsible for co-ordinating a briefing session and had attended the session with the Program Manager in the past 24 months. A pool of 16 potential participants was identified, with whom 12 interviews were conducted, representing 75% of the sample. Those not interviewed were either on leave or no longer worked at the organisation where the briefing session had occurred. Respondents were split evenly between print and broadcast media.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes, and participants were asked to comment on their impressions

of the session, aspects of the session that worked well, suggestions for improvement, any noticeable changes in practice after the briefing session, use of the resources and any suggestions about future activities. Interviews were transcribed and analysed for key themes.

## Results

### *Reach of guidelines and associated resources*

Examination of project reports for the Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project revealed a number of outcomes that indicate willingness on the part of media organisations to engage with the issues in Australia, use of web-based resources, expansion of understanding in new areas and promotion of long-term acceptance of the issues through codes of practice reviews. Key outputs and achievements for the project include, but are not limited to:

- delivery of 148 face-to-face briefings with print and broadcast media organisations in every state and territory of Australia, engaging approximately 800 journalists in print and broadcast organisations in both rural and metropolitan settings
- distribution of approximately 2,500 copies of the resource books, 5,200 copies of the quick reference cards, and 1,260 copies of a CD-ROM resource
- completion of a consultation with Indigenous Australians about the potential impact of reporting suicide and mental illness that has contributed to the evidence base for this particular population group (Skehan *et al*, 2005)
- completion of the Mental Health Sector Scoping Study, which highlighted support for the Mindframe Initiative to assist the sector in its work with the media, and led to the funding of a new project under Mindframe – Mindframe for the Mental Health Sector
- ongoing monitoring of the Mindframe website, which has shown an increase in usage of over 25% since December 2003
- specific monitoring of the Mindframe website that indicated more than a 100% increase in ‘hits’ to the site on three occasions around a high-profile suicide death or attempt in Australia during 2005
- development of targeted electronic resources for Indigenous media and culturally and linguistically diverse media
- development and design of an internal training package that was reviewed by, piloted with and dis-

seminated to identified media trainers for use with their staff

- contribution to substantial changes in media codes of practice, editorial policies and style guides to promote long-term acceptance of the issues and media ownership (for an example see Commercial Radio Australia, Codes of Practice 2004, pp 30–2 at [www.acma.gov.au/acmainterwr/aba/contentreg/code\\_s/radio/documents/cra-codeofpractice.pdf](http://www.acma.gov.au/acmainterwr/aba/contentreg/code_s/radio/documents/cra-codeofpractice.pdf)).

### *Awareness and use of guidelines and associated resources*

Results from the 2005 evaluation indicated quite substantial awareness of project resources. All target groups were more aware of the printed resource books than of the website. From the responses, it appears that awareness of the resources decreases as the amount of contact decreases (*Table 1*, below). Familiarity with the resources was highest in respondents who worked at an organisation that had received a briefing session before December 2004, followed by respondents who worked at an organisation that had received either a drop-in visit or a mail-out. Predictably, the lowest rate of familiarity was found in the control group. Further analysis found a statistically significant difference ( $F=3.71$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) for familiarity with the resource book by type of contact.

For participants who were aware of the resources, usage was quite high in all target groups, with usage rates over 80% for those who worked at an organisation where a briefing had occurred, and over 60% for those in an organisation where a drop-in visit had occurred (*Table 2*, opposite). Use of the website was generally lower than use of the resource book, and drop-in visits and mail-out contact appeared less effective for promoting use of the web-based resource. For those who were familiar with the printed booklet, staff who worked at an organisation that had received a briefing more than 12 months ago were most likely to have reviewed it, followed by those who had received a drop-in visit. For those who were familiar with

**TABLE 1** *Awareness of Mindframe Resources, by Target Group*

	Target Group			
	TG 1 drop-in (N=32)	TG 2 briefing (N=18)	TG 3 mail (N=16)	TG 4 control (N=69)
Awareness of resource book	50%	67%	50%	29%
Awareness of website	28%	28%	19%	9%

**TABLE 2 Use of Project Resources by Those who were Aware of Them, by Target Group**

	Target Group			
	TG 1 drop-in (N=23)	TG 2 briefing (N=14)	TG 3 mail (N=13)	TG 4 control (N=65)
Review of resource book	63%	83%	38%	45%
Review of website	11%	60%	33%	50%
Use of resources	46%	36%	17%	23%

the website, again staff from organisations that had received a briefing were most likely to have reviewed its content. However, the control group, where there had been no known contact, showed the next highest percentage of respondents who had reviewed the website, followed by those who had received a mail-out less than 12 months ago, those who had received a drop-in visit being the least likely in this analysis.

A total of 40 respondents were asked whether they planned to use the resources in the future, and generally how useful they found them. Of these, only four people (ten per cent) reported that they did not think they would use the resources in the future, and these were all respondents from the control group. In addition, 58% of respondents rated the resources as ‘very useful’ and the remaining 42% of respondents indicated that they were at least ‘moderately useful’. None of the respondents indicated that they thought the resources were ‘not useful at all’.

### *Value of the media briefing strategy*

Interviews conducted with key informants in 2006 indicated general support for conducting face-to-face briefing sessions for groups of journalists within their organisation. General comments indicate that the project resources are valued and used by media professionals who have had an opportunity to discuss relevant issues with the project team. The following are a selection of relevant issues and themes raised in interviews with media professionals who had arranged and participated in a media briefing during 2004 or 2005.

When asked about their overall impressions of the briefing session, respondents were quick to praise the program. Participants generally noted that the session was very useful in that it highlighted and clarified a number of issues that they believe are important for journalists to consider.

*‘This particular course gave us very clear guide-*

*lines on what was acceptable and unacceptable in terms of the way suicide and mental health are reported.’*

*‘The reality is that it is a broader ethical issue which needs to be discussed and talked about and thought about in the broader sense before it becomes a time-crucial issue for them.’*

Respondents indicated that they felt the other staff who had participated in the session also viewed it in a positive light, but that for some people there was a perception of a conflict of interest between the key messages under Mindframe and journalistic practice.

*‘We had our senior staff present for the briefing, and once again I would say it was very relevant to what we do with our business. It’s becoming increasingly more of a topic that we have to deal with, so it was good to have it explained to us.’*

*‘I think it doesn’t mean to say that newspaper editors or newspapers aren’t going to occasionally do something that people in the mental health industry disagree with. So it’s something that you need to chip away at, and I think a lot of it depends on who you’ve got as an editor at the time, which changes from time to time when that personnel changes.’*

*‘Even if obviously some of the things they may not agree with – I think it’s important that the issues are raised, they are thought about and they are discussed.’*

Several aspects of the briefing session were identified as ‘working well’ in communicating the key issues. They commonly included the media examples, the quality of presentation, the resources left for staff to use and the fact that it was a face-to-face briefing delivered by an outside professional.

*‘Some of the things that worked better than others were probably the examples – giving actual ‘real life’ examples of stories... and some of the difficulties that those reports raised, and some of the issues they raised. I think that the practical nature of what we do, is always useful for us... it puts it into perspective the way that we would treat it.’*

*‘The open discussion after the formal presentation*

*where journalists could put their specific community-related issues of reporting suicide and mental health issues to her.'*

*'It was quite pleasing to see the Mindframe people [using] a carefully considered push to change attitudes within the community.'*

While few of the respondents felt able to offer any suggestions for improving the actual content of the session, some did comment that the frequency of the training should be considered.

*'Well, I think it is probably important that regular briefings take place, because there are always new people coming on board – certainly in broadcasting you get a big turnover in broadcasters. I don't know how often you would be looking at doing something like that, but certainly every one or two years.'*

*'Probably the only thing I would do to improve it would be to make sure everyone got to see it. I think everyone, right through from management down, needs to see the course and the information.'*

The majority of respondents thought there had been some change in their organisation that could be attributed to the session. In general, these changes related to the attitudes of staff members and their increased awareness of the issues.

*'Rather than just churning the story out, it did have an effect on them when they stopped and thought a little more carefully about whether a story should be running in the first place, and if it was to be run, how it should be approached.'*

*'The power of the information that day was that strong that journalists definitely went away with more awareness of things they need to avoid with their writing in the future. And because of the disparity in what people know about mental health and what the research shows, our people have taken that away.'*

*'It will be a process of just changing attitudes, and probably the first step identified is to get the media on side, and to get the media to understand the issues involved in reporting of suicide.'*

All respondents reported that it is good to make the

resources available to journalists. While some of the respondents were not sure whether the Mindframe resources were being used by any of the staff in their organisation, about half were confident they were being used.

*'Look, I couldn't guarantee that, but people take the cards particularly and are very interested in having personal copies of those because I assume they want to use them.'*

*'Absolutely. Following the briefing we had, we distributed the booklet and the quick reference cards to reporters for reading and passing on. And I have still seen them in the office on people's desk, and also we have them as a reference guide with our producers and our chief of staff.'*

*'Every new journalist that came into the newsroom was given those guides to read, and the brief [quick reference cards] were pinned on the notice board, and they were there all the time.'*

## Discussion

In Australia, efforts have been made not only to develop resources for media professionals on reporting suicide and mental illness, but also actively to disseminate and promote uptake of the resources. This has been achieved principally by engaging face-to-face with relevant sectors of the media, along with other strategies such as targeted mail-outs, conference involvement and working with peak organisations about codes of practice.

The Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project team has been able to engage a substantial proportion of media organisations during 2004 and 2005 in face-to-face discussions, having engaged all the major daily newspapers, at least one key representative from each commercial and public television broadcaster in a metropolitan area, more than 15% of all commercial radio stations, all the major Indigenous media organisations and a small percentage of rural newspapers and community broadcasters. In addition, there have been efforts to engage all media through email alerts, distribution of project resources and promotional material, and attendance at key media conferences.

Despite this coverage, it is difficult to determine the percentage of journalists who have been contacted by the project team directly, given the different size of each organisation and what appears to be a high turnover of staff. However, project evaluations outlined in this paper

indicate that direct strategies (such as briefings and drop-in visits) are effective in promoting awareness and use of the project resources, with retention even 12 to 24 months after a visit. Encouragingly, other indirect strategies to promote the resources (such as mail-outs, email alerts, conference involvement and work with peak bodies) may be having an impact, given that in 30% of organisations that had not had any direct contact with the project, a staff member was still aware of the resources when assessed in 2005.

Interviews with key informants indicated that the briefing session strategy was viewed in a very positive light, which lends great support to the continuation of this strategy. While it was duly noted that there will always be some journalists who feel that free speech in journalism should over-ride any sensitivity in the public, for the majority of participants it appears that the session was a positive experience which, at the very least, gave them an understanding of key considerations. Pleasingly, most respondents reported that they thought there had been some change in their organisation that could be attributed to the session. In general, these changes were related to improved attitudes and confidence among staff about reporting suicide and mental illness, and their improved awareness of the key issues to consider.

The project team has received ongoing support from both media and mental health contacts throughout the life of the project. It is believed that the multi-faceted and comprehensive nature of the Mindframe Initiative generally, and this project specifically, have contributed to improved understanding of the sensitivities involved in reporting suicide and mental illness. It is believed that this improved awareness and understanding will be reflected in media reporting in the future, if not already, in Australia.

## Future directions

This area of work could benefit from further research and evaluative work to explore the factors involved in developing and disseminating effectively guidelines for media professionals internationally and strategies that are more likely to increase uptake and ownership of the issues. International comparisons of development, dissemination, uptake and usage of media resources would be beneficial and would assist those countries in the early stages of this work, or those where uptake has yet to be maximised.

In addition, there is clearly a need to determine whether, even if embraced by the media, the existence of media guidelines has any short-term or long-term effect on future reporting, and whether this can be linked to community outcomes such as reduced suicide rates and reduction

in the stigma associated with mental illness. A six-year follow-up of data in Australia on the nature and extent of reporting, under the Media Monitoring Project (Pirkis *et al*, 2001), will go some way to identifying changes in Australian media practices after active dissemination of the media guidelines *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006). This will provide some insight as to whether the quality and nature of reporting have improved in Australia, but will fall short both of providing any international comparison of media change and of assessing any outcome measures related to the reduction of suicide deaths or attempts, or any change in attitudes towards mental illness.

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