

World of Knowledge

The Influence of Media Reporting of a Celebrity Suicide on Suicidal Behavior in Taiwan

Andrew T.A. Cheng

Distinguished Research Fellow

Institute of Biomedical Sciences

Suicide prevention has become a global mental health concern, and improving the reporting and portrayal of suicidal behavior in the media has been included in most national suicide prevention strategies around the globe. The evidence to support this has been derived from studies reporting an increase of suicide and attempted suicide following certain media stimulus, controlling for seasonal and secular factors. Furthermore, the more networks that carry a suicide story, the greater the subsequent increase in suicidal behavior, and glamorous reporting or portrayal of suicide in the media can maximize the risk of ‘copycat’ suicide. However, a major shortcoming of most studies is that exposure to the media report by those who subsequently engaged in suicidal behavior has not been well investigated.

After the initiation of media reporting about the suicide of a famous male television actor in Taiwan, MJ Nee, extensive media coverage of his suicide started from May 2nd, 2005, the day his body was found, and lasted for about 17 days. Nee committed suicide by hanging from a tree in a countryside fruit yard at the age of 59 years sometime in April, 2005. Detailed examination of the contents of media reports on Nee’s suicide showed that all included sensational words and statements of sympathy for the victim. The method used for suicide was repeatedly described in detail, with pictures/photos featuring the tree where he hanged himself, the rope used, and his body. The suicide act was depicted as an understandable solution to the victim’s dilemma, which included his extramarital relationship and his recent frustrations in show business. Finally, Nee was glorified as a martyr and his past career received adulation (the funeral on May 12th was solemn and majestic, with the President and vice-President of Taiwan both attending). Several aspects of the guidelines published by the World Health Organization in 2000 for the media regarding how to report suicide by a celebrity were contravened (Related website: http://www.who.int/mental_health/media/en/59.pdf).

Our research team conducted three studies to examine effects of Nee’s news on subsequent suicidal behavior. The first study was conducted among all suicides in 2003-2005 in Taiwan (n=10945), using a Poisson time series autoregression analysis. After controlling for seasonal variation, calendar year, temperature, humidity and unemployment rate, there was a marked increase in the number of suicides during the 1-month period after media reporting (relative risk 1.26, 95% CI 1.14 to 1.41) (Fig. 1). The increase was significant in men (relative risk 1.38, 95% CI 1.21 to 1.56), and for individuals using the same highly lethal method (hanging) as the model did (relative risk 1.43, 95% CI 1.20 to 1.71).

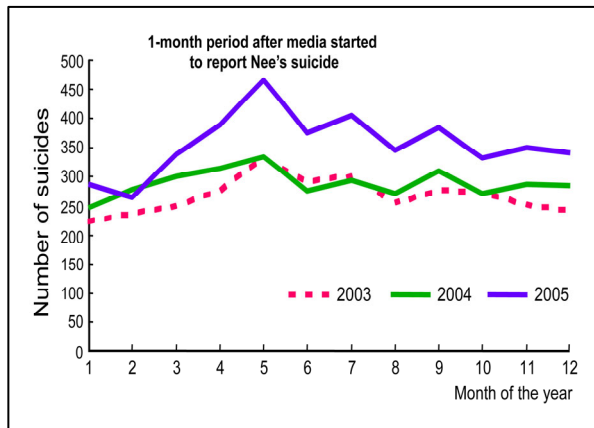


Fig. 1

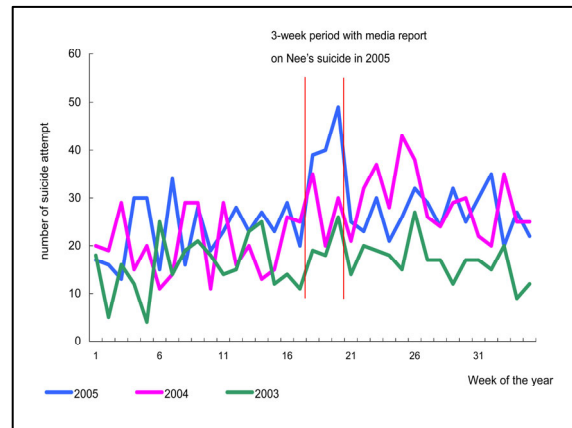


Fig. 2

The second study was conducted among 124 suicide attempters exposed to the media report with a structured interview. Nearly a quarter (23.4%) reported a negative influence on a subsequent suicide attempt. After controlled for seasonal variation, calendar year, temperature, and humidity in a Poisson autoregressive model, there was a 1.55-fold (95% CI 1.26-1.91) increase in the number of suicide attempt during the 3-week period after media reporting (**Fig. 2**). In logistic regression, the risk of such influence was significantly higher among subjects with suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt in the past year. In particular, there was a 52-fold risk (95% CI 5.96-459.14) for a re-induced suicide attempt among those with a previous suicide attempt.

The third study was conducted among 438 depressive patients exposed to the media report with a structured interview. More than one-third (38.8%) of them reported an influence on subsequent suicidal behaviors, including 24 (5.5%) with a suicide attempt. The risk of such influence was highest among patients in a severe depressive state just prior to the media report (adjusted OR 7.81, 95% CI 3.28-18.59). Such influence on a subsequent suicide attempt was highest in patients with a most recent suicide attempt within one month prior to the media reports (adjusted hazard ratio 11.91, 95% CI 3.76-37.72).

These three studies have provided convincing evidence suggesting negative influences of media reporting of a celebrity suicide on subsequent suicidal behaviors in the general population, and among both suicide attempters and depressive patients. Particular attention in terms of potential negative media influences should be paid to patients who are currently depressed and have made a recent suicide attempt. The results provide further support for the need for more restrained reporting of suicides as part of suicide prevention strategies to decrease the imitation effect.

References:

1. International Journal of Epidemiology, 2007, Doi:10.1093/ije/dym 196.
2. Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 2007, 68:862-866.
3. Journal of Affective Disorders, 2007, 103:69-75.