Charcoal burning suicide: trends and prevention strategies
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I. Introduction

Charcoal burning suicide, a type of intentional carbon monoxide poisoning, is a new and increasingly common form of suicide in Hong Kong.\(^1\) Virtually nonexistent prior to 1998, charcoal burning suicide has quickly become the third most common form of suicide, behind jumping and hanging. Its dramatic rise in popularity is alarming, as the number of people who died from charcoal burning in Hong Kong between 1998 and 2000 increased by nine fold.\(^2\) The number of charcoal burning suicide victims in 2000 actually outnumbered those who died from homicides, occupational accidents, accidental drowning, and physician malpractice.\(^3\) Charcoal burning suicide is a major social problem and may become even more widespread in the coming years. For this reason, it is important that Hong Kong understands the phenomenon of charcoal burning suicides and adopts measures to address it.

Charcoal burning suicide has several characteristics that set it apart from other types of suicide. Firstly, it is a comparatively easy way to commit suicide; charcoal is very inexpensive and accessible, the method is relatively painless (thus requiring little courage to perform), and the body is not disfigured. Secondly, charcoal burning suicides are subject to an inordinate amount of publicity. Both characteristics may lead to a disproportional rise in deaths by charcoal burning. This paper examines the problem of charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong, discusses findings from suicide research and overseas prevention methods, and proposes policy recommendations.

II. Short history of charcoal burning suicide

Charcoal burning suicide has only become common in recent years. Before 1997, carbon monoxide poisoning represented less than 2\% of all suicides in Hong Kong.\(^4\) Most of those cases were due to inhaling automobile exhaust, an uncommon method of suicide because car ownership in Hong Kong is limited. In November 1998, a woman committed suicide by burning charcoal in a barbecue grill in her sealed apartment, generating a lethal level of carbon monoxide. This story was extensively covered in the media, making front-page news, and the numbers of charcoal burning suicide cases have steadily increased in the following years.

Intentional carbon monoxide poisoning via burning charcoal in an enclosed space is a local Hong Kong phenomena. Although charcoal burning suicide is a recent trend, it is gaining popularity, has overtaken rates for drowning and taking poisons for two consecutive years and is now the third most common method of suicide.\(^5\) There has been a steady rise in the number of charcoal burning suicides in the last three years with 17 reported cases in 1998, 89 cases in 1999 and 154 cases in 2000.\(^6\) This trend is most pronounced among middle-aged (20-59 years old) people. For instance, in the year 2000, 92\% of all charcoal burning suicide victims were middle-aged.\(^7\) This increase in middle-aged charcoal burning suicide victims are poisoned by inhaling the toxic fumes emitted from burning charcoal in an enclosed space.

\(^1\) Charcoal burning suicide victims are poisoned by inhaling the toxic fumes emitted from burning charcoal in an enclosed space.
\(^3\) 2000 Coroner’s Report.
\(^4\) 1999 Coroner's Report.
victims has inflated the number of middle-aged suicide victims by 14%. These facts and figures are summarized in Table 1.

### Table 1: Summary of Charcoal Burning Suicide (CBS) Trends between 1998-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Suicides</th>
<th>Total CBS</th>
<th>Percent of CBS</th>
<th>Suicides in 20-59 y.o.</th>
<th>CBS in 20-59 y.o.</th>
<th>Percent of CBS in 20-59 y.o.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.95%</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>915</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst the trend of charcoal burning suicide started in Hong Kong, it has already spread to neighboring regions. In Macau, there were 12 charcoal burning suicides in 2000. The rise of charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong could have easily influenced people in other countries. The first Taiwanese charcoal burning suicide victim reportedly learned of the method from Hong Kong news articles posted on the Internet. Charcoal burning suicide has become a public health problem in Hong Kong and may continue spread to other regions and countries.

### III. Demographics of charcoal burning suicide victims

Victims of charcoal burning suicide do not seem to be from the same demographic group as other suicide victims. The number of charcoal burning suicides increased despite stable overall suicide rates from 1998 to 2000, suggesting that people may have switched from other methods to burning charcoal. However, examining the suicide rates by age group reveals that over the 1998 to 2000 period, there was a significant drop in elderly suicides (see Table 2). The drop in elderly suicides coincided with a rise in suicides by middle-aged persons. In contrast to the reduction in elderly suicides, in the past few years, suicides by people between 20 and 59 (mainly via charcoal burning) have increased disproportionately. Since data compiled about charcoal burning suicide victims is limited, further research is necessary to show definitive demographic trends.

### Table 2: Summary of suicides by age group between 1998 and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Suicides by 0-19 y.o.</th>
<th>Suicides by 20-59 y.o.</th>
<th>Suicides by 60 and older y.o.</th>
<th>Total suicides</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>915</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td>-28%</td>
<td>+14%</td>
<td>-7%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current suicide prevention services include specialized programs for the elderly. The decrease in elderly suicides may be linked to the effectiveness of elderly suicide prevention programs. In the future, suicide prevention services may also adjust their programs to address the rise in suicides among middle-aged persons.

Debt is strongly associated with charcoal burning suicides. Of the first hundred charcoal burning suicide victims, 58% were in debt. Between 1998 and 2000, approximately 67% of charcoal burning suicides were by those under the age of 60.

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10 Under the influence of Internet information from Hong Kong, the first case of charcoal burning suicide emerged in Taiwan. Ming Pao Newspaper, June 19, 2000.
suicide victims suffered from debt problems. Not only were most charcoal burning suicide victims in debt, but two-thirds were in insurmountable debt, owing sums totaling at least ten times their monthly salary. In comparison, only 16% of other suicide victims matched for age and gender were in debt.

The association between debt, middle-age, and charcoal burning suicide means that recent increases in charcoal burning suicides occur at a high cost to the Hong Kong economy. In fact, when interviewed, several charcoal burning suicide survivors mentioned debt as one of the reasons why they committed suicide. As persons between 20 and 59 form the bulk of the workforce and charcoal burning suicide victims tend to owe large sums of money, Hong Kong stands to lose more manpower and money if this trend continues.

Recent efforts by banks to share personal credit information can counter the problem of debt, which may exacerbate, if not cause, suicidal tendencies among at-risk persons. In the future, banks may be able to limit the size of loans and number of credit cards given to people with debt problems by checking credit records before issuing loans and credit cards.

Because data linking debt to charcoal burning suicide was collected during the Asian financial crisis, it is unclear whether the association will continue. However, it is useful to continue analysis and collection of demographic data in order to fully understand the nature and scope of this social problem.

IV. Conceptual framework of suicide prevention

The traditional conception of suicide and its causes is that deep, enduring personal and psychological problems lead persons to self-destruction by any possible means. Thus, suicide prevention usually focuses on directly addressing the deeper personal problems of suicidal persons. Whilst this theory and prevention approach is valid for at least some suicide victims, not all methods of suicide are equal in motivation, difficulty, and lethality. Suicidal attempts and outcomes may be affected by external factors.

Charcoal burning suicide has several advantages over other methods. It is relatively easy, painless, and bloodless, thus requiring little courage to perform. In addition, charcoal fumes kill without disfiguring the body and creates a “rosy” complexion on the corpse, which is considered attractive. These characteristics of charcoal burning suicide are tangible advantages over other methods. In fact, several charcoal burning suicide survivors who were interviewed specifically stated that they learned about this form of suicide through reading the newspaper and preferred it because it is easy and comfortable.

Charcoal burning suicide has been made even more attractive by the media’s portrayal of it as romantic. These characteristics of charcoal burning suicide may also be responsible for its rise in popularity.

An investigation of “external” factors which may lead to increases in charcoal burning suicide is necessary in order to address the disproportionate charcoal burning suicide increase since 1998.

Environmental intervention

14 Any negative balance on credit cards or loans from friends, family and banks were considered debt.
16 Research by Kathy Chan. To be published.
17 Presently, Hong Kong has several credit reporting agencies, but all are private and information is only collected from companies and banks that submit them voluntarily. Individual banks also keep private records of individual credit histories. Using this system to determine individual credit risks, however is inadequate because the information is not shared between banks and other agencies. Thus, banks make lending decisions based on incomplete information.
18 Study by Chan K.
The charcoal used for charcoal burning suicides is easy to obtain. A simple shopping trip to the local grocery store will provide all of the materials necessary to commit suicide. Given the ease with which charcoal can be obtained, there exists an environment conducive to charcoal burning suicide. Reducing the accessibility of charcoal may decrease rates of charcoal burning suicides.

Case comparisons

Decreasing the availability of the means to suicide has been associated with reduced suicide rates. The following is a summary of research about suicide via domestic gas, gun control, car exhaust, drug poisoning, and jumping from bridges. The availability of these methods has been positively correlated with suicide rates. These cases have important implications for suicide prevention.

Detoxification of coal gas in England and Wales

In the 1960s and 1970s, England and Wales detoxified its domestic gas supply. Prior to detoxification, suicide via domestic gas poisoning in the 1950s accounted for up to 50 percent of all suicides. Following detoxification, suicide by domestic gas poisoning was virtually eliminated. During this time, there was only a five per cent increase in suicides by other methods, indicating that suicidal persons did not substitute another method for domestic gas poisoning. Furthermore, the overall suicide rate from 1961 to 1971 dropped by 34 percent despite a concurrent 50 percent increase in unemployment.

Although it would be impossible to conduct an experiment showing that decreasing accessibility to means of suicides causes decreases in suicide, this case provides strong evidence that detoxification was responsible for reductions in coal gas suicides and suicides in general. There was little evidence that people had simply switched to other methods. This case contradicts a common belief that suicidal motivation is rooted in deep, enduring inner conflict and that suicidal individuals will usually substitute methods if one method suddenly becomes unavailable.

The situation in the domestic gas detoxification case, however, differs somewhat from the problem of charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong. The means to coal gas poisoning in the United Kingdom were virtually eliminated. In addition, toxic domestic gas was replaced by substantially less toxic domestic gas, so the daily habits of citizens were relatively unaffected. There is, however, no non-toxic replacement for charcoal, and a complete ban on charcoal would impede such activities as barbecues, which are increasingly popular in Hong Kong.

Self-poisoning with drugs

Research on self-poisoning suicides has also substantiated a possible causal link between method availability and suicide. Until 1998, self-poisoning with paracetamol was a common method of suicide in the United Kingdom. Research conducted on paracetamol poisoning suicide survivors has shown a possible link between accessibility and mortality. Prior to 1998, paracetamol was available in two forms—loose tablets and blister-packs. Whereas large quantities of loose tablets could be purchased, blister-
packs limited the number of pills that could be obtained at one time. Differences in quantity and packaging can influence the toxicity of overdoses. On average, those attempters who took paracetamol from blister-packs on average overdosed on fewer pills than those who swallowed loose tablets. In 1998, the UK introduced legislation limiting the amount of paracetamol tablets that could be sold at one time. Following the 1998 legislation, the number of paracetamol self-poisonings decreased significantly by 11 percent.

Further supporting the link between accessibility and suicide rates, another study of paracetamol availability and rates of paracetamol self-poisoning in two different countries—the UK and France—found that paracetamol poisoning is much more common in the UK, where it is sold in larger packages and widely available. French law requires that paracetamol be sold only in pharmacies and only in smaller packages, reducing the accessibility of paracetamol. The reduced availability of paracetamol in France was associated with fewer paracetamol suicides. The temporal evidence and comparisons between paracetamol availability and suicides in the UK and France suggest that method availability is associated with method-specific suicide rates. In fact, interviews of paracetamol self-poisoning survivors revealed that availability of paracetamol was the most commonly cited reason for choosing paracetamol poisoning.

This relationship can be further clarified by studying the nature of paracetamol suicide attempters and victims. Intentional paracetamol overdoses have been shown to be impulsive and accomplished rapidly. Only 20% of survivors had thought about self-poisoning for over a day, and 41% had only thought about overdosing for less than one hour prior to the attempt. Most attempters (79%) took the tablets in less than an hour. Thus, the suicidal intent of people who chose paracetamol poisoning tended to be rapid and impulsive. This type of suicidality can strengthen the connection between availability and suicidal attempts.

When suicidal impulses are transient and sudden, the method chosen can determine the difference between a failed attempt and a death. The legislation in the UK made toxic doses of paracetamol harder to obtain, possibly deterring people whose suicidal intent was impulsive and reducing the mortality of paracetamol drug overdoses. This example is particularly relevant to charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong because we recommend that charcoal not be banned altogether, but that minor measures reducing the accessibility of charcoal be introduced in order to lower charcoal burning suicide rates.

Car exhaust and suicide

Research on the availability of cars and car exhaust suicide rates has further attested to a causal link between accessibility and suicide. In a study involving 28 countries, including Australia, England, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the USA, car ownership was positively correlated

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with higher rates of car exhaust suicides. Likewise, in America, states with higher car ownership have been shown to have higher car exhaust suicide rates.

In addition to correlational evidence, longitudinal research links reduced availability with decreases in car exhaust suicides. The introduction of strict car exhaust emission standards in the United States reduced the toxicity of car exhaust. Following the introduction of those standards in the mid-1960s, car exhaust suicides decreased from 11 to 9 per million people. Taken together, the international temporal and correlational research is strongly suggestive of a causal relationship between reduced opportunity for suicide and decreased suicide.

This example is also applicable to Hong Kong because toxic car exhaust was reduced, not eliminated. Although it is still possible for persons in the United States to commit suicide via car exhaust, a small change in toxicity was followed by a significant change in suicide rates. Similarly, it is possible that small reductions in charcoal accessibility may lead to decreases in charcoal burning suicides. The above studies, however, did not address whether or not suicidal persons switched to other methods after car exhaust became less toxic.

Reducing the accessibility of guns

Research on gun control laws and suicide further supports the link between method availability and suicide rates. From 1962 to 1975, almost all increases in United States suicide rates were attributable to a rise in the availability of firearms and increased gun suicides. Because rates of all other forms of suicide remained constant during that time, it is unlikely that the increase in gun suicides was a result of method switching.

Other US firearm suicide research has shown a similar positive correlation between accessibility and firearm suicide rates. In general, areas in the United States with high gun ownership have higher gun suicide rates even when controlling for gender and race. Correspondingly, a case-control study comparing demographically similar subjects living in two US counties showed that those who had access to firearms were 4.8 times more likely to commit suicide. The total suicide rate of states with strict gun control laws is lower than suicide rates in states without gun control laws. In fact, gun control laws requiring either a license to purchase or a waiting period are associated with lower suicide rates regardless of how strictly the laws are enforced. A study of American youth found that suicide is more likely among adolescents with firearms in their homes even when controlling for the presence of psychiatric diagnoses, past suicidal intent, and family history of psychiatric disorders. A comparison of suicides in King County, Washington, with a demographically similar metropolitan area in Vancouver showed that youth

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suicides, particularly firearm suicides, were significantly lower in Vancouver, which has more restrictive gun control legislation. Thus, the availability of guns is positively correlated with gun suicide rates and suicide rates in general.

Furthermore, research has also found strong, statistically significant temporal data linking reduced firearm availability with decreased firearm suicide rates. In the United States, those states that passed strict gun control laws in 1968 had lower overall suicide rates from 1969 to 1971, suggesting that controlling the means to gun suicides may have been a factor in lower general suicides. The total suicide rate increased in later years, but not as much as those states without strict gun control laws. Likewise, in the year following strict gun laws in Washington DC in 1976, despite a national trend of increasing suicide, firearm suicide rates decreased by 38%, and the overall suicide rate decreased by 22%. Eleven years after this law was enacted, gun suicides had decreased by 25%. Since there was no compensating increase in other forms of suicide following the 1976 law, it is likely that restricting gun accessibility had a direct effect on suicide rates. Restricting access to firearms may have limited the suicide rate in those states with strict gun control laws, especially because firearm suicide is one of the most lethal and irreversible methods of suicide.

Studies of suicide in other countries have also found a statistically significant correlation between accessibility to guns and suicide rates. In particular, there is a significant positive correlation between firearm availability and both overall and firearm suicide rates in countries such as Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, and West Germany.

An examination of suicide rates before and after the passage of gun control laws in Canada and Australia also supports the hypothesis that accessibility is linked to higher suicide rates. After the enforcement of 1978 gun control legislation in Canada, firearm suicides decreased significantly both by percentage and rate. The overall suicide rate also decreased, suggesting that displacement to another method of suicide did not occur. Similarly, the Australian Weapons Act 1990 required a 28-day cooling-
off period and safety test to purchase firearms, thus making the acquisition of guns more difficult. Following this 1990 gun control law firearm suicides decreased.\textsuperscript{50,51}

The data linking suicide rates to gun accessibility, though not proving experimental causation, is both strong and recurring. Although it is possible that a confounding variable may have been associated both with low firearm availability and lower rates of suicide, the relationship between accessibility and suicide rate is strong and holds internationally. Even if all potential firearm suicide victims were to switch to another method, it is probable that the other method would be less lethal, still resulting in lower suicide rates. Gun control laws did not make suicide impossible; rather, it restricted the range of suicide options available to methods that were less lethal.

This example not only strengthens the proposition that charcoal accessibility should be reduced to reduce charcoal burning suicides, but it also suggests that laws designed to restrict accessibility may influence suicide rates regardless of the strength of enforcement. In addition, the above examples show that restricting access to one method will not necessarily lead to increases in other types of suicide.

\textit{Jumping from bridges}

Bridge barriers have also been shown to reduce suicides by jumping from bridges. For instance, after barriers were constructed on a popular bridge for suicide in Washington, DC, there was only one recorded suicide by jumping from that bridge.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, jumping suicides in the Washington, DC, area decreased in subsequent years by 50 percent, suggesting that suicidal persons did not simply choose neighboring bridges from which to jump.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, the total number of suicides decreased in the period directly following erection of the barrier, further indicating that method substitution did not occur.

Again, this example shows the influence of external factors, such as method accessibility, on suicide rates. Likewise, charcoal burning suicide rates may be affected by charcoal accessibility.

\textbf{Our Observations}

The evidence suggesting that accessibility to specific methods of suicide is causally related to suicide rates is temporal and correlational. This relationship has been demonstrated through studies of domestic gas, drug poisoning, car exhaust, firearm, and jumping suicides. A controlled experiment verifying causation would be impossible to conduct, but the temporal and correlational evidence is strong and recurring. Easy availability may contribute to high suicide rates.

The chief argument against a causal relationship between the opportunity for specific types of suicide and suicide rates is that suicidal people simply switch methods; when one method becomes less convenient, people will commit suicide by other means. This argument, however, does not take into account the advantages of particular forms of suicide. Charcoal burning suicide, for instance, is cheap, painless, and bloodless. It also calls for little courage and is seen as romantic. Thus, charcoal burning suicide is considerably more attractive than most other methods of self-destruction.

In addition, the method substitution argument does not consider the fact that suicidal intent can be impulsive, ambivalent, and fleeting. Reducing accessibility may not eradicate suicide, but for suicidal persons whose suicidal impulses are transient, reducing the lethality and availability of suicide options may decrease the number of attempts and suicide mortality. A person who is prevented from suicide once will not necessarily try again. Decreasing ease of suicide may also increase chances for intervention.

\textsuperscript{52} O’Carroll PW, Silverman MM. Community suicide prevention: the effectiveness of bridge barriers. \textit{Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior} 1994; 24: 89
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
In Hong Kong, where charcoal burning suicide is already the third most popular form of suicide, data on the influence of restricting the means of suicide in other countries has important implications for the sale of charcoal and charcoal burning suicide rates. Would it help if a range of measures to reduce charcoal availability were imposed? We thought of three measures but each of them could well have administrative difficulties:

1. **Require that charcoal be bought by at least two people?**
   Suicide is generally a solitary activity. This measure would deter some suicidal persons because finding someone else to buy charcoal with him or her would require more planning and increase the likelihood of intervention. Such a measure would accommodate those who wish to use charcoal for barbecues, as ingredients and equipment are often purchased in groups.

2. **Restrict the sale of charcoal to a certain radius from public barbecue sights?**
   This measure would ensure charcoal supply to those who use it for recreational purposes while making the acquisition of charcoal more difficult for persons who plan to use it for suicide. However, it would be difficult to implement because many public barbecue sites in country parks have very few neighboring shops. In addition, people who wish to barbecue at private sites might find it inconvenient to locate and travel to specific shops that sell charcoal.

3. **Prohibit charcoal sales altogether?**
   Although banning charcoal sales would effectively eliminate charcoal burning suicides, the public would probably be unreceptive to this measure. Barbecues are increasingly popular in Hong Kong, and banning charcoal would bring this popular group activity to an end.

**Media**

Charcoal burning suicide has received inordinate coverage by the Hong Kong media. Since the media provides the public with a wide range of information and influences community perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, it is important to evaluate the media’s role in the rise of charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong. Suicides are often newsworthy, and the media has the right to report it, but the possible negative impact of sensational and excessive reporting on society should be considered. The majority of people who contemplate suicide are ambivalent about committing suicide, and publicity may be one of the factors that lead these vulnerable persons to follow through with their suicidal thoughts. Therefore, the manner in which suicide is reported is as important as whether or not it is reported at all. The media can also play a positive and powerful role by educating the public about suicide and its prevention.

**Research on the Impact of the Media on Suicide**

Newspaper and television reports on suicide have been associated with increased suicide. The following is a summary of research on the media’s role in imitative suicides. These findings can be used in constructing effective suicide prevention strategies.

*The Effect of Non-Fictional Suicide Stories*

The majority of suicides are not reported in the media, but when the decision is made to inform the public, the coverage is often too specific—including descriptions of a particular person, method or place. The effect of non-fictional suicide media coverage on imitative suicide behavior has been studied for several decades. The majority of studies investigate the media’s influence through newspaper reports. Phillips and colleagues compiled a list of suicide stories appearing on the front-page of the *New York Times* between 1946 and 1968 and examined the U.S. monthly suicide statistics to estimate the effect of these reports. After correcting for overall trends and seasonal variations, they found that suicides rose significantly just after front-page suicide stories. In an extension of this initial finding, researchers examined suicide stories between 1946 and 1977 and found that cases involving celebrities had a

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particularly strong impact. Several studies within the past decade have reported findings that are consistent with these early investigations and revealed that the magnitude of the increase is proportional to the amount, duration, and prominence of media coverage. This body of research demonstrates that prominent newspaper coverage of suicide is associated with a significant increase in the rate of suicide.

Evidence of the media’s impact on suicide rates have been found not only in the US but also internationally. The effect of media coverage on suicide rates has been documented in many countries including Austria, Germany, Hungary, Australia and Japan. In these studies, researchers found an increase in suicide by readers or television viewers when the number of stories about individual suicides increased. An increase was also found when the story of an individual suicide was placed on the front page or at the beginning of a broadcast, and when the suicide is reported at length in or many stories. Dramatic headlines (i.e. "Boy, 10, Kills Himself over Poor Grades") have also been found to contribute to suicide contagion.

Other types of non-fictional portrayals of suicide have also been shown to have an effect. In France, the publication of a book entitled Suicide: How to do it - History, Techniques, News was linked to an increase in the number of suicides. Television has also been found to influence suicidal behavior. Phillips and colleagues found an increase in the number of suicides up to ten days following television news reports of suicide cases and that stories covered by multiple programs and on stations have the greatest negative impact.

Case Study: Viennese Subway Suicides

Most studies on imitative suicidal behavior are conducted retrospectively and thus a causal link between media and contagion is difficult to establish. Correlational studies, however, have provided substantial evidence suggesting that media coverage can influence suicide rates. In 1987, a field study was conducted to investigate the relationship between media reports and imitative suicidal behavior in the Viennese subway system. Shortly after the subway system was implemented in Vienna in 1978, jumping in front of trains became an increasingly popular way to commit suicides, and suicide rates sharply increased. In addition, the mass media reported these incidents extensively and dramatically in major Austrian newspapers.

The Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention (AASP) was formed to address these troubling developments and to study the role of mass media reporting on imitative suicide. They examined actual reports in Viennese newspapers and found that certain reports printed after the first subway suicides and attempts could “trigger” additional suicides. The media guidelines they developed and the hypothesis about the possible relationship between media reports and imitative suicidal behavior are summarized below:

**The trigger-effect will be bigger:**
- the more details of the special methods are reported (“how much the pills cost”)
- the more suicide is reported as being inconceivable (“he had everything life can offer”)
- the more the motives are reported to be romantic (“to be forever reunited”)
- the more simplifications are used (“suicide because of bad news”)

**The report will receive more attention:**
- if the report is printed on the front page
- if the term "suicide" is used in the headline
- if there is a photograph of the person who committed suicide
- if the attitude of the person is implicitly described as being heroic and desirable (“he had to do that in this situation”)

**The trigger-effect will be smaller:**
- if more alternatives to suicide are shown (where it is possible to find help in such a situation)
- if there are reports about a crisis that was overcome and did not result in suicide
- if the readers are provided with background information on suicidal behavior and suicide in general (such as what to do with someone who expresses suicidal thoughts)

A campaign was launched in mid-1987 to inform journalists about the AASP’s findings and to discuss the possible negative consequences of media reporting. Alternative ways of covering the subway suicides and suicides in general were offered, and discussions were initiated with journalists. The group persuaded the two largest Viennese newspapers to drastically decrease the publicity they gave to subway suicides. Following the media campaign, reports on suicidal behavior became less sensational. In addition, before the campaign, all but one subway suicide in 1986 was reported in the newspapers; after the campaign, several were left unreported. Moreover, in the second half of 1987, following the change in media reporting, there was an 84.2% decrease in attempted and completed subway suicides and this decrease was sustained for 5 years. No such marked decline was found for other types of suicides in Vienna.

The researchers did not force journalists to change their media reports. The information and guidelines offering alternative ways of reporting were presented, and journalists were left to act on them.

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These results suggest that it is possible to contribute to suicide prevention by working with the media in addition to working with suicidal individuals and their significant others. However, since this is the only field study to date, similar studies need to be conducted for further analysis of the situation. Moreover, the researchers emphasize that it is not sufficient to give guidelines to the media on only one occasion. If sensational reporting of suicides resumes the guidelines should be presented again.73

**Hong Kong Media and Charcoal Burning Suicide**

In November of 1998, the first case of charcoal burning suicide was reported in Hong Kong newspapers. The 35-year-old woman left a suicide note, sealed her apartment and burned charcoal in a barbecue grill, producing a lethal level of carbon monoxide. This story was extensively covered and reported as front-page news. Large photographs of the deceased, lying peacefully on a mattress with a child's blanket covering her body were printed alongside the story. These serene representations allowed this method of suicide to be romanticized as an easy, effective and comfortable way to die.74 In addition, a photograph of the charcoal burner she used was also included. Hence, the scene of the suicide and the novel method she used to take her life was explicitly revealed to the public. This type of sensational coverage runs counter to the aforementioned Vienna recommendations and are of the type of reporting that was followed by suicide increases.

Following this initial case, the newspapers also covered subsequent charcoal burning suicides. The reports often emphasize the methodology, describing in detail how the suicide was conducted, and stress that self-asphyxiation by burning charcoal is painless and the easiest way to die. In accompanying photographs, charcoal-burning suicide is likened to sleeping. These representations allow charcoal burning suicide to be free from the psychological fears associated with other methods of suicide, such as hanging and jumping from heights.75 The public perception is that this method allows the victim to die in a physically beautiful state with rosy lips and a pale complexion with no visible physical trauma. These romanticizations were further reinforced when a teenage couple, before committing suicide, tied their fingers and toes together with red thread to symbolize their eternal bond in the afterworld.

In the month following the initial report, nine more cases of charcoal burning suicides occurred. In a span of three years, there has been a nine-fold increase in the number of charcoal burning suicides; there were 17 cases in 1998, 89 in 1999 and 154 in 2000.76 “Siu tan”, the Cantonese term for charcoal burning suicide, has become a household term.

The dramatic increase of this new form of suicide has alarmed social workers, policy makers and researchers alike. This concern was reflected in the 1999 Coroner's Report, which stated:

> Of concern is the increase (from 17 cases in 1998 to 89 cases in 1999) in suicide by a particular type of carbon monoxide poisoning. The method involves inhaling fumes from a common and easily obtained substance. Coroners are left with the troubling notion that some deaths in these circumstances have been indirectly brought by the widespread reporting of the ease and apparently painless method of self destruction.”77

This sentiment was echoed in a 2002 speech to LegCo by Dr. E.K. Yeoh, the Secretary for Health and Welfare, “the mass media should be sensitive to the negative influence which may be generated in society by their illustration of violence and suicide.”78 Clearly, the people of Hong Kong are concerned about the media’s effect on the proliferation of charcoal burning suicides.

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73 Ibid.
75 Interview with Professor K Leung on April 16, 2002. Journalism Department-Chinese University of Hong Kong.
77 1999 Coroner's report.
78 Legislative Council: Motion Debate on Promoting Community Spirit” February 27, 2002.
The media plays a central role in disseminating information in today's society and influences public perceptions of suicide. In Hong Kong, media attention on charcoal burning suicides may have contributed to the recent increase in the number of cases. The sale of Chinese language newspapers in Hong Kong is dependent on newsstand purchases since subscriptions play only a minor role in distribution. Therefore, the front-page headlines and photographs have a large impact on circulation. In efforts to lure customers, newspapers are too often brazen, sensational and flashy, even in dealing with suicide cases. According to Kenneth Leung, Professor of Journalism at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, “The freedom of the press is not for commercial interest, but for the public interest. Although the media is a commercial enterprise, besides being a business, it is also a public utility. It is also a cultural product because it influences the public; people’s perceptions will be changed. Editors and reporters should be aware of their responsibility.” Media professionals need to recognize the negative effects of sensationalizing suicides and should not be allowed to put profits ahead of social welfare.

The Kong Journalists Association (HKJA) recognizes the importance of responsible suicide reporting and provides a set of guidelines in its Code of Ethics. The HKJA, established in 1968, is an independent organization run by working journalists to enhance press freedom and the integrity of news coverage. As part of their goals, they seek to “raise professional standards” and organize “seminars and workshops to improve reporting skills.” The HKJA Code of Ethics explicitly states, “journalists should not panderm to prurience, indecency and sensationalism when reporting news, especially when it involves violence, sex-related crime and suicide.” Photojournalists are also urged to handle with caution pictures that are gory or violent and assess (1) whether they are necessary for news reporting, (2) the impact on the society, and (3) the impact on the people involved and their families before inclusion in publication. Since the HKJA is a professional organization and not a statutory body, they have no way to enforce these guidelines. Therefore the two main problems that exist are collectively setting agreed-upon standards for suicide reporting and the lack of enforcement for such standards.

Conclusion

Charcoal burning suicides have become increasingly prominent in Hong Kong, and the media’s role in popularizing the method should be seriously addressed. There is strong research evidence that non-fictional newspaper and television coverage are associated with a significant increase in the number of suicides following the reports. Hong Kong journalists should be made aware that the manner in which they report suicides may have a negative effect on vulnerable persons. Alarmingly, charcoal burning suicides are spreading beyond Hong Kong’s borders and have been reported in Macau, China and Taiwan. The first victim in Taiwan was reported learned of the method from reading Hong Kong newspapers on the internet. The media has the right and freedom to report suicides. However this freedom is tempered with public responsibility. Journalists should be held accountable for the style and quality of their reporting.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are a condensed version of the recommendations by the World Health Organization and the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention regarding media coverage of suicide. All of the following can be feasibly implemented by Hong Kong newspapers without infringing upon free speech.

79 Interview with Professor K Leung on April 16, 2002. Journalism Department-Chinese University of Hong Kong.
80 Interview with Professor K Leung on April 16, 2002. Journalism Department-Chinese University of Hong Kong.
81 http://www.hkja.org.hk/
82 ibid
83 Under the influence of Internet information from Hong Kong, the first case of charcoal burning suicide emerged in Taiwan. Mingpao news. June 19,2000.
1. When Reporting on Suicides:  
   1. Work closely with health authorities in presenting the facts.
   2. Refer to suicide as a completed suicide, not as a successful one.
   3. Present only relevant data, on the inside pages.

   While some suicide stories are newsworthy, media coverage should not be excessive. Front-page newspaper coverage is not the ideal place for suicide reporting because it can accelerate the copycat effect.

   4. Highlight alternatives to suicide.
   5. Provide information on help-lines and community resources.

   Provide information on mental health services and help-lines with up-to-date telephone numbers and addresses, publicizing risk factors and warning signs, and providing telephone numbers of support groups for survivors.

   6. Publicize risk indicators and warning signs.
   7. Describe physical consequences of non-fatal suicide attempts.

   Relating consequences such as brain damage, paralysis, etc. may also act as a deterrent.

   8. Don't publish photographs or suicide notes.
   9. Don't report specific details of the method used.

   Research has shown that media coverage of the suicide has a greater impact on the method of suicide adopted than the frequency of suicides.  

   10. Don't give simplistic reasons.

   Suicide should not be depicted as an understandable response to social or cultural changes or degradation. The complexities involved should be acknowledged and the motives behind a suicide should neither be simplified nor reported as unexplainable. Suicide should not be depicted as a method of coping with personal problems such as bankruptcy, failure to pass an examination or sexual abuse. Acknowledging the numerous factors involved, including mental or physical illness, substance abuse, family disturbances, interpersonal conflicts and life stressors, would be a positive media approach to reporting suicides.

   11. Don't glorify or sensationalize suicide.

   The mourning of the person's death should be emphasized and glorifying the suicide victims should be avoided. Portraying the victims as martyrs and objects of public adulation may cause susceptible persons to believe that their society honors suicidal behavior.

   12. Don't apportion blame.

   Many factors contribute to suicide, and apportioning blame to one reason or person will oversimplify the story and may facilitate copycat suicides.

2. Promotion of suicide coverage guidelines within the media

   1. Workshops for journalists

   Establish workshops for journalists to address the possible negative consequences of sensational suicide reporting and to discuss alternative ways of covering charcoal burning suicides and suicides in general. The recommendations offered above can be discussed and added upon.

   2. Enforcement Mechanisms

   Hong Kong currently lacks effective and binding enforcement mechanisms for responsible suicide reporting. Ethical standards exist, however with no regulatory body possessing the authority to enforce these recommendations they are easily disregarded. Allowing the Press Council to become a statutory body, where breaches of ethical standards can be punished would establish accountability. Such penalties need not be monetary. Newspapers that violate guidelines could simply publish a public admission of their infringement on their front page as a deterrent to future violations.

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Final Thoughts

Since 1997, charcoal burning suicide rates have jumped from being nonexistent to the third most common form of suicide. This type of suicide is already a major public health issue, and Hong Kong should act now to reduce charcoal burning suicide rates.

This paper details the rise of charcoal burning suicides in Hong Kong and the influence of method availability and media coverage on suicide rates. Sensational and gratuitous media coverage can potentially increase suicide rates. Although the press has the right to cover suicides, the type of coverage should be modified to prevent unnecessary rises in charcoal burning suicide rates. In addition, studies have shown that the availability of suicide methods is linked to suicide rates. Thus, decreasing the availability of charcoal should decrease charcoal burning suicide rates.

The popularity and severity of charcoal burning suicide also makes the need for further research even more pressing. Most of the research used in this paper was conducted overseas and focused on other forms of suicide. Fully addressing this Hong Kong phenomenon clearly requires comprehensive local research specifically about charcoal burning suicide.