

Toward Responsible Suicide Reporting in Iran: Media Practices, Social Media Challenges, and WHO Recommendations

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Dear Editor,

According to the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2021 study, suicide resulted in approximately 7 40,000 annual deaths worldwide (1). Although, the global prevalence of suicide mortality has declined in the past three decades, it still remains as a major public health problem requiring universal preventive interventions. Appropriate and effective prevention approaches should be adopted that address multifaceted determinants of suicide risk, including biological, contextual, and social factors. "Suicide contagion", i.e., the increase in suicide-related thoughts and behaviors following exposure to suicide, is a well-known societal risk factor (2). Different studies have shown that exposure to suicide among relatives or others is associated with an increased risk of suicide. In the suicide literature, media-related suicide contagion is referred to as the "Werther effect" (2). Given its critical role, the World Health Organization (WHO) has published a guideline to responsible reporting of suicide-related news by media professionals as: What is the best preventive strategy? Is it to avoid exposing people to suicide news? Originally released in 2000 and updated for the fourth time in 2023, this practical guideline provides a series of evidence-based recommendations presented as a list of "dos and don'ts". Many researchers investigated the adherence of news agencies to the WHO responsible reporting guideline and its relationship with suicide rates among general populations in different countries, finding a significant association between the two.

In recent years, increased internet coverage and reliance on social media as the primary source of news, coupled with decreased trust in official media, have further complicated the issue (3). Despite its undeniable role in providing equal opportunities across various human life domains, social media also poses potential detrimental effects on health-related behaviors, including suicide. The user-generated nature of social media content and the absence of a comprehensive regulatory system facilitate the spread of misinformation and harmful news (3). Recently, based on scientific findings, experts in the field of suicide prevention have placed greater emphasis on targeting social media to decrease its negative impact on suicide contagion, or the Werther effect, and to enhance resilience against suicide related thoughts and behaviors, i.e., the Papageno effect (4).

Situation in Iran

Iran, like many other countries, faces a substantial number of suicide attempts and related deaths annually, particularly due to various problems in recent years (5). The Mental and Social Health and Addiction Department of the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education, has established different programs to control suicide among the general population in collaboration with different national and international organizations.



As a preventive strategy, the department has translated and disseminated all published versions of the WHO guideline for responsible reporting of suicide news; however, adherence to its recommendations is under debate. To the best of our knowledge, the existing literature on this subject in Iran is limited to only two published studies. The first study conducted a systematic content analysis of suicide-related reporting frequency in Iranian print media in 2018, while also evaluating adherence to standardized media reporting guidelines (6). The second investigation focused specifically on digital Iranian news platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing the quality of suicide reporting against WHO international media standards for responsible coverage of suicidal behaviors (7). Both studies have shown that official Iranian news agencies had not fully adhered to WHO recommendations about responsible reporting of suicide news.

In December 2024, we, in the Mental Health, Social Health and Addiction Department, translated, summarized and adapted the latest WHO suicide reporting guideline to produce a Persian version. After that, the department's staff, especially the Director General (DG) (Last author), planned and actively engaged in disseminating the guideline. For example, the DG held various meetings with the media and thoroughly discussed the necessity and recommendations of the WHO guideline. In addition, the guideline has been disseminated to all 64 universities and schools of medical sciences across the country to support widespread education of local news media and agencies. Furthermore, the DG conducted several interviews on the guideline with national television and radio channels.

Almost a month later, unfortunately, an iconic Iranian satirist, writer and diarist, died from suicide, serving as a case study to evaluate adherence to the Persian adaptation of the WHO guideline. The department briefly reviewed published reports by official news agencies regarding the above mentioned suicide. As expected, the news agencies did not fully adhere to the WHO reporting guideline. Also, like other bad news, this event received more attention among Persian social media users. However, the news coverage appeared to be more adherent to the guideline compared to previous cases.

Future directions

Based on the local context and global evidence, we propose several suggestions to prevent the Werther effect among the Iranian population:

- a. A collaboration effort between the Iranian Ministry of Health, journalism associations and social media platforms should conduct targeted workshops to train journalists and social media influencers on WHO guidelines. Promoting awareness of both ethical and public health consequences of unprofessional reporting will help establish stronger accountability within the industry.
- b. A systematic evaluation mechanism at the national level should be created to monitor how both traditional media platforms and digital media sectors follow the suicide reporting guidelines. A public recognition system, combined with non-punitive enforcement of compliance violations, will promote better media standards.
- c. A nationwide public information initiative should be launched to teach people about the Werther effect and equip them with skills to engage properly with suicide content on the internet. Users should receive tools to enable them to identify dangerous content, making it easier to reduce exposure to risks.
- d. The government should allocate funds to ongoing research that tracks suicide rate changes linked to media coverage in Iran, with a specific focus on the impact of social media platforms. The research would help fill present evidence gaps while supporting regional intervention strategies.
- e. The government should support integrating the guideline into Iran's media regulatory frameworks while establishing penalties for recurrent violations. Technical partnerships with technology providers to develop automatic content-blurring algorithms should also be considered.

Conclusion

Media coverage affects global suicide rates because it either increases the risk or reduces it based on the Werther effect. The initial adoption of WHO suicide reporting guideline by Iran does not mean practitioners follow them properly, because they still fail to adhere to this guideline in publicized suicide cases. Preventing suicide outbreaks requires a comprehensive strategy that combines enhanced media collaboration, accountability measures, public education initiatives, improved research activities and reinforced policies. Through the adoption of proven strategies, Iran can convert guidelines into practical steps that align with international standards for both professional media conduct and suicide prevention.

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