Suicide and media reporting: a submission to the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction – Oranga Tāngata, Oranga Whānau

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction – Oranga Tāngata, Oranga Whānau.

We are a group of organisations and concerned individuals who work in the area of suicide prevention in New Zealand. We are writing to ask that the Inquiry specifically recommends progressing the development of new media reporting standards for suicide prevention, as recommended by the Law Commission and accepted in principle by the previous Government.

Research clearly supports the link between unsafe suicide reporting and increases in suicidal behaviour. However, restrictions in reporting of suicide must be balanced with principles of public interest and freedom of expression. New Zealand has had a range of suicide media reporting guidelines since 1998, but these have not been well supported by a comprehensive media engagement programme, and have not been well supported by media.

The Law Commission’s 2014 review of suicide reporting in New Zealand investigated this issue in detail, and made a set of recommendations for reform. This included amending the Coroner’s Act to open up reporting on suicide, accompanied by strengthened guidance for media about safe reporting to ensure that the law change did not have a harmful effect on public health. This group of recommendations was accepted in full by the previous Government.

Most of the Law Commission’s recommendations were taken up, and in 2016 the Coroners Act was amended. However in practice, no progress has been made on the recommendation to develop standards for suicide reporting, along with an ongoing programme to disseminate, promote and support the implementation of the standards, and to evaluate the success of those standards in achieving the goal of low-risk reporting of suicide. Media reporting on the issue of suicide has increased since the law change, with more than 4,000 media items published in the last calendar year.

The development of media reporting standards and education is necessary and urgent. The Law Commission’s report clearly articulated this need five years ago. Suicide reporting guidelines are a key part of every identified national suicide prevention strategy, and are clearly recognised as an effective and necessary part of a joined-up response to suicide prevention, for example by the World Health Organization and International Association for Suicide Prevention.

Our organisations have a range of experience working positively with media. For example, the Mental Health Foundation is contracted by the Ministry of Health to monitor and support media reporting, and recently worked with journalists and people bereaved by suicide to create guidance for families talking to media after a suicide death. Le Va recently worked with 23 Pasifika media organisations to provide training and develop a guideline resource for them. Others of us have worked with media to support effective reporting, or attempt to prevent unsafe reporting. Along with other professionals and organisations working actively for suicide prevention, we share a belief that there is a strong need for new reporting standards that are well supported with a programme or dissemination, promotion, education and evaluation. While there is demonstrated willingness within media organisations to engage positively on this issue, there is insufficient resource in the suicide prevention sector to provide comprehensive guidance and support.
About the authors

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand works towards creating a society where all people can flourish and experience positive mental wellbeing. Suicide prevention is a core focus of our work, which includes working with communities and professionals to support safe and effective suicide prevention activities, create support and social inclusion for people experiencing distress, and develop positive mental health and wellbeing. [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)

Le Va is a national not for profit organisation focused on supporting Pasifika families and communities to unleash their full potential. We do this by providing evidence-informed and culturally relevant resources, training, education and tools carefully tailored with solutions that meet the unique needs of the communities we serve. Our integrated portfolios span mental health, suicide prevention, addictions, disability support services, public health, violence prevention, and cultural competency. [www.leva.co.nz](http://www.leva.co.nz)

Clinical Advisory Services Aotearoa (CASA) delivers national services in the suicide prevention and postvention area through a team of highly experienced people with clinical and/or lived experience of suicide. We specialise in working collaboratively with agencies and communities to help them best manage suicide risk and improve wellbeing through the delivery of innovative programmes that are tailored to need and based on research and practice based evidence. [www.casa.org.nz](http://www.casa.org.nz)

Victim Support is a nationwide charitable organisation which provides a range of practical, advisory, and psychosocial support services to people affected by crime, trauma, and suicide. Victim Support is contracted with the Ministry of Health to provide a nationwide postvention support service to people affected by suicide. [www.victimsupport.org.nz](http://www.victimsupport.org.nz)

Northland District Health Board collaborate widely across the region prioritising suicide prevention, to reduce risk and build resilience with tātāmariki, whānau and community. Through the FUSION process the DHB is a partner managing the flow of information and intelligence across government and non-government agencies to inform focus and intervention to those that needed it most. [www.northlanddhb.org.nz](http://www.northlanddhb.org.nz)

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References

12. Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand. (2017). Comment or no comment? Making the right choice for you, your family and whānau about talking to media after losing someone to suicide. Auckland, New Zealand: Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand