

Suicide prevention. Knowledge of WHO guidelines and collaboration between media and mental health professionals in Italy

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SUMMARY

Objectives

In the framework of the measures defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to contain and reduce suicide mortality rates, the need to improve training of professionals employed in the media sector is highlighted so as to ensure media coverage of suicide cases in line with the guidelines issued in 2017.

The objective of this study is to observe whether in Italy:

- 1. media professionals are informed about WHO guidelines, the role they can play in suicide prevention, and their willingness to collaborate with mental health professionals to ensure better media coverage of suicide cases;*
- 2. mental health professionals are able to communicate suicide and direct the work of media professionals towards the implementation of WHO recommendations.*

Methods

An online survey, hosted by the google.it platform (<https://www.google.it/intl/it/forms/about/>), was prepared and the link to the questionnaire was disseminated through social networks in Italy (Facebook and LinkedIn). In order to orient the selection correctly, such survey was shared in "closed professional groups" only (e.g. journalists, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.). Participants were able to join the initiative from October 2021 to March 2022 and anonymously answer questions online, on a voluntary basis. At the end of the survey, 170 people (70 media professionals and 100 mental health professionals) had successfully completed the questionnaire.

Results

The analysis of data collected with the present study confirms that, even in Italy, knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines is not optimal. There is a need for greater collaboration between media and mental health professionals, although the latter do not feel ready to support an interview on the topic of suicide. Also, specific training is needed to deal more competently with this social and health issue, bringing it within the framework of WHO guidelines.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is desirable to implement agreed strategies at international level, to enhance knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines and their uniform application worldwide. In this framework, it is necessary to identify solutions that, through a virtuous cycle of training and deployment, allow to reinforce and update the background of media and mental health professionals, facilitate their collaboration and valorise their role as "public health actors".

Key words: suicide, media, papageno effect, werther effect, journalism, WHO

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Introduction

Suicide is a worldwide phenomenon ¹ that affects the whole of society, with a significant impact on public opinion, families and communities. It is a deliberate act by which an individual decides to take his or her own life, and it is a choice, often unpredictable and with complex motivations, that underlies a situation in which a life of great pain is experienced. Such

suffering is structured in a very complex way because it has a multidimensional and multidetermined nature. It can have an organic origin (i.e. the consequence of a disability or a pathology), but nonetheless it can be the product of the interaction of a series of variables of a psychosocial nature that tend to induce people to adopt addictive behaviours²⁻⁴ (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse) which over time, end up limiting their psychophysical well-being and, consequently, the quality of their mental health.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), in 2019 more than 700,000 people committed suicide worldwide, with an incidence of 1 case per 100 deaths⁵. The National Institute of Statistics reported that the mortality rate for suicide in Italy, in the period 2015-2017, was 6 per 100 thousand residents (lower than the European average of 11 per 100 thousand). This rate increases with age, from 0.7 in the very young (up to 19 years of age) to 10.5 in the elderly, with values 4 times higher in males than in females. In the 20-34 age group, suicide is a significant cause of death (12% of deaths)⁶. As this is a significant public health problem⁷, WHO has recognized the need for urgent action and has issued guidelines that set targets to be met by 2030⁸, urging nations to take the necessary action to contain and reduce mortality rates. As part of the measures defined, the need to improve the training of media professionals is reiterated, in order to ensure media coverage of suicide cases, in line with the measures issued in 2017⁹. In this respect, WHO indicates that responsible reporting should provide accurate information about where to seek help, educate the public about the facts of suicide and its prevention, without spreading myths, and report stories on how to cope with life stressors or suicidal thoughts and how to get help. Likewise, particular caution should be applied when reporting celebrity suicides or when interviewing bereaved family or friends, for media professionals themselves may be affected by stories about suicide. In addition, it is important not to place stories about suicide prominently or to unduly repeat such stories; also, it is advisable not to use sensational headlines and language which emphasizes, normalizes or presents suicide as a constructive solution to problems, nor to explicitly describe the method used, provide details about the site/location or publish photographs, video footage or digital media links.

The application of these measures is considered extremely important because the media is recognized as having the capacity to influence suicidal behaviour¹⁰ through a "media contagion"¹¹ which makes adolescents and young adults particularly vulnerable¹², as they are more prone to identification^{13,14} or imitation¹⁵, as well as being more susceptible to difficulties in managing emotions¹⁶ and complicated situations. In such

circumstances, emotional congruence¹⁷ with one or more events recounted in the media, especially if related to a celebrity or influencer, may lead an individual to consider suicide as the appropriate solution to problems, and thus to decide to end his or her own life voluntarily, choosing to emulate the previously observed or learned method of suicide. This phenomenon is known as the "Werther effect"¹⁸. To give an example, in the five months following Robin Williams' death, evidence indicated that the rate of suicides committed in a way similar to that used by the well-known actor, increased by 32%¹⁹.

The media can also have a protective function through the "Papageno effect"²⁰ if the media coverage of a suicide is based on a narrative, free from banalisation or sensationalism and allows to balance the need to know about the existence of a critical event with the need to give guidance on how to deal with stress or suicide-related thoughts and how to get help. This provides an experience that increases the propensity to support, seek help and respect life, factors which are believed to limit the risk of a similar event occurring²¹. For example, in Vienna in 1987, the number of committed suicides in the underground decreased by 80% after the media were asked to deal with the subject more cautiously²². Similarly, on the occasion of the death of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, American newspapers and television stations were very careful in their coverage of the event, avoiding the use of the word 'suicide' in their headlines. This helped to prevent emulation or prompting more people to take their own lives in the Seattle area where the frontman lived²³.

In general, therefore, it is possible that individuals are affected by media content and that their mental health status may vary in relation to the quality of information provided by the media²⁴. This is possible through a collective, multifaceted and rapidly changing process, which, due to complex variables, cannot be reduced to a simple binary evaluation of a "good" or "bad" nature²⁵. The multiplicity of national guidelines and the different level of knowledge of the 2017 WHO recommendations by information providers, has led to conflicting results and often not in line with the stated requirements. For this reason, a part of the scientific literature is leaning towards the need for a global and interdisciplinary strategy which, through training and collaboration between professionals (e.g. journalists, psychologists and psychiatrists, etc.), enables suicide-related events to be treated with an approach that limits the "Werther effect" and promotes the "Papageno effect"²⁶. In this regard, it has been verified that better media coverage could be achieved by developing public communication skills of psychiatrists and psychologists, who are the most sought-after target group by journalists during their in-

vestigations. For that matter, a recent survey ²⁷ found that training designed for mental health professionals would contribute:

1. to raise awareness of the effects of suicide related communication;
2. to concretely help journalists to better implement WHO recommendations.

The objective of this study is to find out whether in Italy:

1. media professionals (journalists and public information officers) are familiar with WHO guidelines, the role they can play in suicide prevention, as well as their willingness to collaborate with mental health professionals to ensure better media coverage of suicide cases;
2. mental health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists) are able to communicate suicide and direct the work of media professionals towards the implementation of WHO recommendations.

Methods

The study was conducted using a questionnaire hosted by the google.it platform (<https://www.google.it/intl/it/forms/about/>). The link to the survey was disseminated through social networks in Italy (Facebook and LinkedIn). In order to orient the selection correctly, it was decided to share the questionnaire in “closed professional groups” only (e.g. journalists, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.). Participants were able to join and answer the questions anonymously and on a voluntary basis. Those who decided to take part in the initiative were informed in advance about the purpose of the study and gave consent to their participation and data processing. The settings used to organize the collection of responses made it possible to automatically exclude duplicate participation.

Results

The questionnaire was available online from October 2021 to March 2022 and was completed by 170 subjects (70 media professionals and 100 mental health professionals).

Results related to media professionals

The personal data of participants in the “media professionals” category are shown in Table I.

Many professionals have indicated the need for specific training in order to report on a suicide (57.1%).

An important number of participants stated that they had not had the opportunity to deal with suicides (48.6%), but have the experience to report on such an event (62.9%). In fact, they are aware that a suicide case could have emotional consequences for those who read

TABLE I. *Personal data of “media professionals”.*

Media professionals (70 persons)	Age
Men: 45.7%	18-30: 4.3%
Women: 54.3%	31-40: 32.9%
	Older than 40: 62.9%

or listen to the news, and for those who edit it (overall 75.8% of the answers); also, they believe that the media have a role to play in the prevention of suicide (80%). Nevertheless, the majority of respondents (68.6%) have never participated in an awareness-raising campaign on the phenomenon of suicide, although they would like to take part in such initiatives.

WHO guidelines are not adequately known by 54.3% of the participants. However, it is remarkable that there is a broad agreement on the need to apply this recommendation in the practice of their profession (68.6%). For this reason, there is particular interest in learning more about the phenomenon of suicide by contacting psychiatrists (34.3%) or psychologists (37.1%). To date, the suicide of a famous person and details of where or how the death occurred (51.4%) is still believed to merit the front page of a newspaper, but at the same time, there is an emerging conviction that it is also necessary to provide readers/listeners with directions to seek help and support (71.4%).

Results related to mental health professionals

The personal data of those who participated in the “mental health professionals” category are shown in Table II. Nearly all participants reported that they consider training in suicidology to be necessary for their profession

TABLE II. *Personal data of “mental health professionals”.*

Mental health professionals (100 persons)	Age	Profession
Men: 36%	22-30: 28%	Psychologist: 48%
Women: 64%	31-40: 24%	Psychiatrist: 28%
	41-50: 29%	Psychotherapist: 24%
	Older than 50: 19%	

(93%). As a matter of fact, more than half of the professionals (53%) had faced at least one case of suicide. In spite of this, 68% of the participants never took part in campaigns to raise awareness of the phenomenon of suicide, although they would like to join such initiatives. Similarly, it is largely agreed that public information officers should be supported by mental health professionals to report on a suicide case (98%). However, most of the answers provided by these professionals show that they are not aware of WHO's recommendations to the media on the subject of suicide (69%), they are not informed about the "Werther effect" nor "Papageno effect" (53%), and that they do not feel ready to be interviewed on the topic of suicide (79%). It is probably for these reasons that they have not cooperated with the media (97%), although 42% of them are willing to do so.

Discussion

The analysis of the data collected confirmed that in Italy there is no widespread knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines within the two professional groups (media and mental health professionals) that took part in the survey. Nevertheless, most media professionals are aware of the fact that the reporting of suicide can cause emotional distress in those who learn or disseminate the news and that this necessitates guidance on how to seek help or support. There is, also, a need for greater collaboration between mental health professionals and the media, but the majority of those who practice health care are not well enough prepared to communicate suicide and direct the work of media professionals towards the implementation of WHO recommendations.

Therefore, there is an emerging need for training which will enable media professionals to be able to ensure proper media coverage of a suicide event and mental health professionals to have a better understanding of the phenomenon of suicide, as well as to have the possibility to interact with journalists, in order to guide their media activities in line with the guidelines issued by WHO.

The surveys examined outline a scenario in which the lack of a clear line of conduct and the different level of knowledge of WHO recommendations by media and mental health professionals, make it more difficult to pursue the required standards.

Though, it is interesting to highlight that most of the participants (media and mental health professionals) would like to take part in suicide awareness campaigns and believe that there is a need for collaboration between the two professional groups. This would improve the quality of public information on mental health issues²⁸, thus contributing to an increase in the protective function of the media (Papageno effect). Such a course of action would undeniably have a positive impact on psy-

chosocial well-being and would promote a better quality of life, because proper media coverage can limit the social stigma²⁹ that leads individuals not to request help³⁰ and to conceal their suffering³¹, gradually losing confidence in themselves and in their ability to conduct a normal life to the point of deciding to take their own life. It is certainly desirable, therefore, to initiate shared strategies at international level to improve knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines and their uniform application throughout the world. Indeed, in the era of globalization, better management of information and critical events is absolutely necessary to prevent and reduce the emotional contagion that can lead a person to decide to end his or her own life. In this perspective, it is advisable to devise training programs for journalists and mental health professionals that will extend the opportunities for collaboration. In this sense, the Mini Media Training project, described by Walter et al., 2021, is particularly promising. It provides a short media training session with the aim of increasing the capacity of psychiatrists to contribute professionally in interviews.

Professional boards can play a strategic role by initiating concerted initiatives that facilitate better training of students/trainees as well as continuous updating of professionals in the field of mental health and journalism, providing them the opportunity to improve their professional technical background and to play a decisive role in the prevention of deaths by suicide in the course of their work

Limitations and future direction

As far as I am concerned, this study is the first initiative undertaken in Italy to monitor the level of knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines, the awareness of the role media can play in suicide prevention, and the suitable conditions for effective collaboration between media and mental health professionals to improve media coverage of critical events.

However, there are limitations related to the size of the sample used, which was entirely selected online. It is also possible that, even though a media or mental health professional has a social media account, they spend little time reviewing its content; as a result, they were less likely to be able to apply for participation in the survey. In addition, although the sample of professionals who took part in the tests is believed to be representative of the population practicing a profession in the field of mental well-being in Italy, the majority of participants were female, and just under half of psychiatrists do not have a significant experience of suicide (less than 2 cases during their career). A "selection bias" is therefore possible.

Future studies should use a large and representative sample, including webmasters or moderators of blogs and administrators of social media groups, as suicide-

related content is also frequent on the web³² and on social media³³. Moreover, it is desirable to personally interview psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists in order to directly collect their experiences, and verify through role plays, their ability to interact with the media and direct their work towards the implementation of WHO recommendations.

Conclusions

The analysis of the data collected with the present study confirms that in Italy there is not an optimal knowledge of the 2017 WHO guidelines. There is a need for greater collaboration between media and mental health professionals, although the latter do not feel ready to support an interview on the topic of suicide and are not well prepared to direct the work of media professionals towards the implementation of WHO recommendations. Future studies are desirable to monitor a larger sample (also through face-to-face interviews) and to propose solutions that, through a virtuous cycle of training and employment, will improve the background of these professionals and enhance their role as “public health actors”³⁴.

Data availability statement

Data supporting the conclusions of this article have

been aggregated and presented in percentage terms. Raw information should be requested from the author who will decide whether to make it available.

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Conflict of interest statement

The Author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Ethical consideration

Participants gave their informed consent to participate in this study. Participation in the survey took place anonymously through the completion of an online questionnaire. In no way is it possible to trace the answers back to the persons who provided them.

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Appendix

Media professionals

1. How old are you?
 - 18-30.
 - 31-40.
 - older than 40.
2. You are...
 - Man.
 - Woman.
3. Have you dealt with suicides in your profession?
 - Yes, once.
 - Yes, more than once.
 - No, never.
4. Do you think you have the necessary experience to report a suicide case?
 - Yes.
 - No.
5. Do you think that specific training is needed to report a suicide case?
 - Yes.
 - No;
 - I don't know
6. Does the suicide of a famous person deserve the front page of a newspaper and details of where and how the death occurred?
 - Yes.
 - No.
7. In your experience, in the case of suicide, is it necessary to use sensationalist language or to give directions for help and support?
 - Sensationalist language.
 - Indications for asking for help.
 - both precedents.
 - I don't know.
8. If you have to deal with a suicide case, you would need to find out more about the phenomenon by contacting
 - Psychologists.
 - Psychiatrists.
 - None of the above, I report on an event.
9. Do you know the recommendations on suicide that the World Health Organisation has addressed to the media?
 - Yes.
 - No.
10. Do you think it is right to apply the recommendations of the World Health Organisation in the practice of your profession?
 - Yes.
 - No.
 - I don't know.
11. Do you think that the mass media have a role in preventing suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No.
 - I don't know.
12. Have you ever participated in a campaign to raise awareness of the phenomenon of suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No, I would like to.
 - No, I don't care.

13. In your opinion a case of suicide could have emotional consequences

- Yes, for professionals reporting the news.
- Yes, for those reading or listening to the news.
- Yes, for the public/readers and media professionals.
- No, it is only news.
- I don't know.

Mental health professionals

1. You are...
 - Man.
 - Woman.
2. How old are you?
 - 22-30.
 - 31-40.
 - 41-50.
 - older than 50.
3. What is your profession?
 - Psychologists.
 - Psychiatrists.
 - Psychotherapist.
4. Do you consider specific training in suicidology useful for your profession?
 - Yes.
 - No.
5. Have you dealt with suicides in your profession?
 - Yes, once.
 - Yes, more than once.
 - No, never.
6. Have you ever participated in a campaign to raise awareness of the phenomenon of suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No, I would like to.
 - No, I don't care.
7. Do you think it is necessary for a public information officer to use the support of a health professional to report a case of suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No.
8. In the course of your profession, have you worked with public information and communication officers on the topic of suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No.
 - No, I would be willing to do it.
9. Do you think you could face an interview on the topic of suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No.
10. Do you know the Werther effect and the Papageno effect resulting from a report of a suicide?
 - Yes.
 - No.
11. Do you know the recommendations on suicide that the World Health Organisation has addressed to the media?
 - Yes.
 - No.