

World Suicide Prevention Day: Safer Media Reporting

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A focus on safer reporting and portrayal of suicide in the media will be highlighted on World Suicide Prevention Day this year, says Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand (SPINZ).

SPINZ is organising a series of seminars in Auckland, Wellington and Nelson on September 10-12 entitled "The Role of Media in Suicide Prevention". A broad range of stakeholders have been invited, including editors and journalists, public relations professionals, healthcare workers and researchers.

"Suicide is a complex issue, and its prevention requires a range of initiatives across different sectors, including the media," says Merryn Statham, Director of SPINZ. "These seminars are designed to foster discussion between the media and people with expertise in suicide prevention, which is critical to enhancing the safe reporting and portrayal of suicide."

The theme for World Suicide Prevention Day this year is: "Think Globally, Plan Nationally, Act Locally". The format of the SPINZ seminars presents all three perspectives.

"Research internationally has shown that some types of media reporting and portrayal of suicide can increase suicide risk," Statham says. "We also know that enhancement of safe reporting and portrayal of suicide by the media can make an important contribution to suicide prevention."

A global perspective will be provided by keynote speaker Jane Pirkis, Associate Professor in the School of Population Health at the University of Melbourne. Pirkis' work on the internationally-recognised Media Monitoring Project examined the extent, nature and quality of media reporting of suicide and mental illness in Australia for a full year.

Local speakers will include Jim Tucker, former editor of the Auckland Star and current Head of Journalism at Whitireia Journalism School; Paul Thompson, Group Executive Editor at Fairfax; and Keri Welham, Senior Writer for the Dominion Post.

Other perspectives will include presentations from Lifeline, local DHBs, and researchers on New Zealand-based media research projects and clinical case studies of people at risk of suicide.

"SPINZ acknowledges that there has been a positive shift in the way many journalists have approached this issue over the last few years," Statham concludes. "We're focussed on providing an environment in our seminars where dialogue between media professionals and experts in suicide prevention can take place."

Registrations for the SPINZ Seminar Series are open until **September 8**. Limited spaces are available. Registration is online at www.spinz.org.nz/seminar .

ENDS

Media enquiries to:

Chris Banks

Senior Communications Officer

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

09 300 7028 or 021 790 236

Spokesperson and event details follow.

SPOKESPERSON

Merryn Statham is the Director of SPINZ (Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand). Her background and ongoing passion is education. With a background in teaching, Merryn moved to working with young people and their families who were disconnected from the education system.

The challenges faced by these families motivated her to move into the mental health promotion sector. The focus of information provision within the suicide prevention sector, links up a passion for ongoing learning and working for the benefit of healthier communities.

ABOUT SPINZ

SPINZ stands for *Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand*. It is a non-government, national information service. Its role is to provide high quality information about suicide prevention to assist communities in reducing suicide through intervention and prevention.

It is part of the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, and is contracted by the Ministry of Health to provide its services. SPINZ staff are located in Mental Health Foundation offices in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

SPINZ is not a crisis or counselling service.

KEY MEDIA PRESENTATIONS

“Suicide and the media: What we know and what we don’t know”

*Associate Professor Jane Pirkis, University of Melbourne
(All seminars)*

This presentation describes the evidence base which suggests that media reporting of suicide can influence actual suicidal behaviour. It will discuss the approach taken by various countries to developing resources to promote responsible reporting.

In particular, it will discuss Australia’s experiences with developing and rolling out a resource for journalists known as ‘Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness’. It will describe changes in the nature and quality of reporting of suicide in the Australian media which have occurred since the introduction of Australia’s resource.

“Media freedom and suicide coverage - a contrary view”

*Jim Tucker, Head of Journalism, Whitireia Journalism School, Wellington
(Auckland only)*

Jim Tucker is a journalist, editor, teacher, and lately, a blogger. His experience covers 22 years as a working journalist, culminating in editorship of the Auckland Star and Sunday Star. He wrote and edited the journalism textbooks used in New Zealand’s journalism schools from 1991 to 2007.

The news media industry has lobbied strongly for liberalisation of the laws governing coverage of suicide cases – Jim will argue that its case is weak:

“The news media’s over-riding ethical compass has utilitarianism as its magnetic north - the greatest good to the greatest number. This tends to be self-serving, and on its own is a flawed philosophy because it ignores the moral nature of an action, and relies on the ability to predict consequences accurately...This is not an issue about media freedom alone.”

“Challenging The Taboo – Reporting Suicide Effectively”

*Paul Thompson, Group Executive Editor, Fairfax New Zealand
(Wellington only)*

Paul Thompson is the Group Executive Editor of Fairfax Media, New Zealand’s largest media company. He was formerly editor of The Press in Christchurch. As a journalist and editor, he has been closely involved in coverage of suicide as a public health issue.

New Zealand media outlets are generally responsible in their coverage of suicide. They see suicide as a major public health problem and one that needs to be reported robustly and in a balanced manner. There is a strong taboo about talking openly and honestly about suicide and responsible journalists should challenge that taboo. There is now more awareness among editors about the need to exercise care and restraint when covering suicide.

The Commonwealth Press Union suicide reporting protocols have proven to be effective and have been adopted by Fairfax Media publications. The media industry is committed to continuing to work with other stakeholders to ensure coverage of suicide is appropriate, constructive, balanced and comprehensive.

“The S Word – A Journalist’s Perspective”

*Keri Welham, Senior Writer, Dominion Post
(Nelson only)*

Does safe reporting of suicide really mean soft reporting? Keri won the social issues news reporter category at this year’s Qantas Media Awards, for the Dominion Post’s series on media coverage of suicide, *The Silence Isn’t Working*. She will discuss The Dominion Post’s reporting around the issue of media coverage of suicide and the newspaper’s active pursuit of New Zealand-based research in this area.

She will discuss how a reporter can attempt to work within the basic guidelines without compromising on the strength or significance of their story, and give examples of stories where she has consulted suicide experts to discuss the approach, but not the content, of stories about suicide.