

## **MEDIA MAY PLAY ROLE IN COPYCAT SUICIDES**

**By Vicki Brower**

**Reuters, May 12, 2002**

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The media may play an unwitting role in increasing the likelihood that a vulnerable individual may attempt or commit suicide, according to Dr. Madelyn S. Gould, professor of psychiatry and public health at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York.

"New studies show that the incidence of 'copycat' and clusters of suicides—which occur most often with adolescents—increases after extensive newspaper or television coverage," Gould said at the Suicide Prevention 2000 symposium held here.

"'Suicide contagion' is real, and there are numerous recent studies that show a correlation with the quantity of certain types of news coverage and incidence of suicides or attempts," Gould added. Suicide contagion does not occur in individuals without other risk factors, which include pre-existing mood disorder such as depression or bipolar disorder, a family history of suicide, aggressive behavior, substance abuse and impulsivity, Gould stressed.

"Imitating a suicide appears to be more likely if a news story provides details on methods, minimizes the influence of mental illnesses, and portrays the victim in heroic or romantic terms," Gould added in a telephone interview with Reuters Health.

Representing a suicide as a mysterious act by an otherwise "healthy" or "high-achieving" person may lead individuals suffering from depression and suicidal thoughts not to seek help, she said. In addition, it may encourage identification with the suicide victim, which also seems to increase the likelihood of suicide in vulnerable individuals.

Recent studies conducted in the US and overseas have shown that decreases in suicide rates occur following the implementation of media guidelines. For example, after Austria adopted guidelines for the press, the number of suicides fell, Gould remarked.

The American Suicide Foundation, which sponsored the symposium at which Gould spoke, is trying to develop a partnership with the media to enhance the effectiveness of the reporting of suicide while minimizing the risk of

copycat acts. Working with the media, the foundation hopes to minimize harm while not infringing upon free speech.

One positive step journalists can take is to state that suicide "is most often a fatal complication of different types of mental illness, many of which are treatable," Gould said.

Providing local resource information is also encouraged. The main goal of the program and the foundation is to prevent suicide.

Another step that can be taken is to exercise care illustrating the victim and relatives to avoid encouraging a pathological identification with the victim, and inadvertently normalize or even glorify the death.

"Over 90% of persons who commit suicide have a significant psychiatric problem at the time of their death, most of which have existed for months or years before the suicide," said Gould.