



Research paper

Newspaper reporting and the emergence of charcoal burning suicide in Taiwan: A mixed methods approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2015

Received in revised form

4 December 2015

Accepted 27 December 2015

Available online 6 January 2016

Keywords:

Charcoal burning suicide

Media

Newspaper

Mixed methods

Acculturation

Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Background: It has been suggested that extensive media reporting of charcoal burning suicide was a key factor in the rapid spread of this novel method in many East Asian countries. But very few empirical studies have explored the relationship between media reporting and the emergence of this new method of suicide.

Aims: We investigated the changing pattern of media reporting of charcoal burning suicides in Taiwan during 1998–2002 when this method of suicide increased most rapidly, assessing whether the characteristics of media reporting were associated with the changing incidence of suicide using this method. **Methods:** A mixed method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis of newspaper content during 1998–2002 was used. We compared differences in reporting characteristics before and after the rapid increase in charcoal burning suicide. Point-biserial and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to quantify the associations between the media item content and changes in suicide rates.

Results: During the period when charcoal burning suicide increased rapidly, the number of reports per suicide was considerably higher than during the early stage (0.31 vs. 0.10). Detailed reporting of this new method was associated with a post-reporting increase in suicides using the method. Qualitative analysis of news items revealed that the content of reports of suicide by charcoal burning changed gradually; in the early stages of the epidemic (1999–2000) there was convergence in the terminology used to report charcoal burning deaths, later reports gave detailed descriptions of the setting in which the death occurred (2001) and finally the method was glamorized and widely publicized (2001–2002).

Limitations: Our analysis was restricted to newspaper reports and did not include TV or the Internet.

Conclusions: Newspaper reporting was associated with the evolution and establishment of charcoal burning suicide. Working with media and close monitoring of changes in the incidence of suicide using a new method might help prevent a suicide epidemic such as charcoal burning suicide seen in Taiwan.

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1. Introduction

In less than 10 years, suicide by burning barbecue charcoal in a closed space increased from being a rarely used method of suicide to become the second most common method in Taiwan, accounting for approximately 30% of suicides by 2008–2010 (Chen

et al., 2015). In many cities in Taiwan, the method is now the most common means of suicide (Lin et al., 2010). The rapid 'uptake' of the method was believed to be fueled by widespread media reporting and glamorization of the method as a painless, effective and peaceful method of suicide (Chen et al., 2013).

Media reporting of the first few cases of charcoal-burning suicides may have played an important role in the adoption of this method in Taiwan. In neighboring Hong Kong, the emergence of charcoal-burning suicide was believed to be associated with the extensive media reporting of a single case in September 1998

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(Chung and Leung, 2001; Yip and Lee, 2007). The very first news report in Hong Kong described the method in detail; it was portrayed as a peaceful, painless, and effective way to end one's life (Chan et al., 2005; Yip et al., 2010). Very few studies have examined how the media portrayed this new method when it first appeared in Taiwan and none have investigated whether characteristics of reporting were associated with the increase in incidence of suicides by charcoal burning (Chen et al., 2013). A recent Taiwanese study showed that the intensity (i.e. average number of reports per suicide) of newspaper reporting of charcoal-burning suicide was associated with the incidence of suicide by this method during 1998–2002 (Chen et al., 2013). This study however, didn't consider qualitative aspects of the media reports or issues such as news content, size of the news articles or where the news item was placed. Based on a review of psychological models of suicide, Florentine and Crane (Florentine and Crane, 2010) indicated that 'cognitive availability', namely how accessible something is in one's mind, could be an important factor influencing the choice of suicide method. They also suggested that the rapid increase in charcoal-burning suicide could be an example of the media's influence on the 'cognitive availability' of a new suicide method in the general population, when media reports included detailed information of how the method could be employed. In contrast, although charcoal is readily available in western countries, charcoal-burning suicide is still very rare as it is not culturally associated with suicide. A more in-depth understanding of how the media established the 'cognitive availability' of a novel method of suicide in a society may potentially help inform the development of interventions to prevent future rapid uptake of new highly lethal methods of suicide.

The aims of the current study include (1) to document the evolution of newspaper presentations of charcoal burning suicide in Taiwan over time – from its first appearance in news articles in the late 1990s to its widespread and high profile coverage by 2002 and (2) to investigate whether the characteristics (e.g. glamorization, front page reporting) of newspaper reports of charcoal burning suicide affect the incidence of suicide using this method.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

A mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods was used. Newspaper articles on charcoal burning suicide in two leading National Taiwanese Daily newspapers – United Daily (UD) and China Times (CT) during 1998–2002 were retrieved. These two newspapers accounted for approximately 60% of newspaper sales in Taiwan during the study period. The content of all the reports was analyzed.

2.2. Data

Using online search tools, United Daily News Dataset (for UD), and Knowledge Media Winner (for CT), the news articles containing Chinese key words related to suicide (see Appendix I) during 1998–2002 were searched in the headline ($N=21,143$). Editorials, fictional stories, suicide terrorism, and educational articles were excluded, leaving a total of 5,554 suicide news reports. Articles were then read individually to identify those that reported charcoal burning suicide vs. other methods of suicide. Altogether 301 news reports ($N=147$ for UD, $N=154$ for CT) covering 260 charcoal burning suicide events were identified. Unless specified otherwise, our main unit of analysis is each report.

Data on suicide was obtained from official death records in Taiwan, following ICD-9 (International Classification of Disease)

codes were used to identify suicide deaths: E950–959 (intentional self-harm) and E980–989 (intent undetermined, injury undetermined whether it is accidental or self-inflicted). Deaths certified as undetermined intent were also included because previous research indicates that many suicide deaths are likely to be classified into this category (Chang et al., 2010b). We did a sensitivity analysis using certified suicides only (i.e. undetermined deaths excluded). There is no specific code for charcoal-burning suicide under the ICD classification system. It was coded under E952 (suicide and self-inflicted poisoning by other gases and vapors). The equivalent code for intent undetermined was E982 (poisoning by other gases undetermined whether accidentally or purposely inflicted). Therefore, E952/E982 was used to denote charcoal-burning suicide in our analysis. It was estimated that approximately 90% of the suicide under E952/E982 was charcoal burning deaths (Lin et al., 2008).

2.3. Data analysis

2.3.1. Quantitative content analysis

A standard data extraction form was completed for each suicide report. The form included fields requesting information on characteristics of reporting which have been shown to be associated with an increase in suicides in previous research (Etzersdorfer et al., 2001; Hassan, 1995; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009b; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Sonneck et al., 1994) i.e. (1) Prominence of the report: a. front page vs. elsewhere, b. page size, c. use of photographs, and d. description of the method in the headline. (2) Glamorization of the method: the method was described as a. peaceful, b. being able to maintain the appearance/intactness of the body, c. beautiful looking/face turned rosy, d. painless and e. effective/lethal. (3) Details of the method described: a. sealed a room, b. burned charcoal in a small space (bathroom, car, etc.), c. co-ingestion of hypnotics or alcohol and d. other technical details. (4) Whether financial problems or unemployment was portrayed as a precipitating factor. (5) How the factors contributing to the death were presented (single factor or multiple factors) and whether mental disorders contribute. (6) Whether the report concerned a single suicide, a suicide pact or a homicide-suicide. (7) Whether injury to others (e.g. from a house fire) was reported. (8) News item focus: attempted suicide or completed suicide. Additionally, we calculated reporting intensity (average number of reports per suicide) and repetitive reporting (number of reports concerning the same event). The data were extracted from the news reports by a single researcher (C-WT). To improve the quality and consistency of data extraction, three authors (Y-YC, C-WT, KC-CW) initially jointly extracted data from 20 randomly selected news reports and coded these articles independently. Discrepancies were discussed and refined until all three authors reached consensus on approaches to categorization. Tsai then completed the coding of the whole 301 articles.

We used Joinpoint regression analysis (National Cancer Institute, 2012) on monthly suicide count data to identify when the onset of the rapid rise in charcoal burning suicides occurred and when it plateaued. The characteristics of newspaper reports of charcoal burning suicide following their first appearance up to the month when the incidence of charcoal burning suicide rapidly increased were compared. Point-biserial (for dichotomized reporting variables) and Pearson (for continuous reporting variables) correlation coefficients were calculated to quantify the associations between repetitive reporting (number of reports describing the same event), characteristics of the reporting (prominence of the news items, glamorization of the method, detailed description of the method) and the differences in suicide rates before and after the appearance of the news items (post publication suicide rates minus pre-publication suicide rates). The difference in suicide

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