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Suicide matters shouldn't be sensationalised, sensitive reporting urged

[Wan Norshira Binti Wan Mohd Ghazali](#) [June 29, 2021](#) [No Comments](#)

By Wan Norshira Binti Wan Mohd Ghazali

As the world is still fighting off the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of many other side issues can now be felt. The implementation of the movement control order (MCO) 3.0 in May recently has affected many people socially, mentally and economically.

As the media reported, the current middle-income group (M40) has the potential to be downgraded to the lower-income group

(B40) due to the closing down of various sectors. Many daily income earners have been greatly affected by this condition even though some are allowed to continue their operations under MCO 3.0.

Although understandably the main objective of MCO 3.0 is to save the lives of the people, it should be noted that saving livelihoods is equally important. In this regard, the writer felt compelled to comment on the issue of suicide that has dominated the media in Malaysia for the past few days.

The increase of suicide attempts and cases was recorded since MCO 1.0 in 2020 as people felt pressured to make ends meet. Financial problems, family issues and the state of mental health are among the main factors that contributed to suicide. However, from the writer's observation, suicide news was not being played up during MCO 1.0 as much as what is observed today. It is appalling to find that suicide cases have become the limelight in the media without censorship.

It is, thus, important to call for media responsible reporting when highlighting suicide events as they not only involved people who committed the action but also the family members of the victims.

Ethically, the media should weigh between what is right and what is wrong and assess the possible outcomes of their reporting especially on vulnerable members of the society. There are many effects of explicit suicide news reporting. Research showed that the media reporting on suicide cases led to suicidal attempts and cases among individuals who are in the same situation and facing almost similar problems.

Suicide is claimed to be contagious based on a phenomenon known as the Werther effect. The term was borrowed from a novel titled "The Sorrow of Young Werther" which portrayed the protagonist Werther who committed suicide in the name of love. The book had caused 40 people to take their lives using the same way as Werther. The pattern of suicide used by Werther was consistent until present times which supported the view of suicide contagion.

The media, therefore, should make use of the available guidelines on how to report suicide attempts and cases which will provide not only accurate information but also being sensitive at the same time. As the guideline is subject to the interpretation of each media practitioner, self-regulation should be exercised to ensure responsible and sensitive reporting could be achieved.

Media should not only focus on the readership or audience, but should reconsider if the headlines and supporting contents such as photos or videos might trigger some people to emulate the same action. It is time to practise self-censorship and not become a source of inducement for others to end their lives due to news reports.

Irresponsible reporting is not a new issue. It was underscored by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, Khairy Jamaluddin, recently who called on the media to be more responsible when reporting about vaccination. Many publications and news portals fall into the trap of clickbait and sensationalism. However, some news publications remain objective in portraying vaccination in an effort to encourage people to inoculate. The writer seconded this view and believed that the media should give the same treatment to reporting suicide cases.

If two years ago, suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people aged below 29 years old, it is not surprising if it includes the household providers or income earners among the middle-aged group as the impact of COVID-19 could be more severe for these groups of people.

The media should relook at suicide as a social, economic and public health issues altogether and pay more attention to addressing the problems rather than sensationalising. The media could do its part by enlightening people of the possible way of getting out of their problems during this difficult time.

Responsible and sensitive reporting should come together to portray the society we are living in as still a safe place for all.

Those in need of help can contact: Befrienders

at befrienders.org.my/centre-in-malaysia or call 03-7627 2929; Talian Kasih at 15999 (24 hours); and Lifeline (Mandarin) at 03-4265 7995.***

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