



THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

Youth Suicide

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Aim

To emphasise the important role of general practitioners in relation to youth suicide.

Principles

- The RACGP views youth suicide as a very serious and potentially preventable problem.
- The RACGP recognises the opportunity that GPs have for intervention given the fact that many young people attend their GP within days or weeks of attempting suicide.

Background

Standardised suicide rates for Australia have been relatively stable in recent years at a level of about 13 deaths per 100,000 population.¹ The rates show an increase over rates in the 1960s and early 1980s.

A total of 345 young men and 55 young women aged 15-24 years committed suicide in Australia in 1993.² This represented a slight overall decrease in suicide rates for young people in this age group from the rates for 1992 and 1991. Despite this overall trend, there is an apparent continuing increase in the suicide rates for adolescent males in rural areas. This especially involves young males aged 15-19 years who have access to firearms.³

Suicide attempts by young women also show a continuing increase.⁴

While some young people are reluctant to approach mainstream health providers, the GP is the health practitioner most often consulted. Young people seeking assistance from a GP may be depressed or contemplating suicide. The contact provides an opportunity for the GP to intervene

appropriately. It is important to note that asking about suicidal intent has not been shown to precipitate suicide.

Depression is a significant risk factor for suicide,⁵ but not all young people who commit suicide are clinically depressed. Other risk factors for suicide include changes in relationships, changes at school or work, abuse at home, at school or in the workplace, family disharmony, unemployment and a family history of suicide. Feelings of loss may also be a predisposing factor for suicide.

The use of alcohol and drugs is often associated with suicide in young people.

Young people who express suicidal ideas often go on to attempt suicide. There may also be other signs of suicidal intent present such as withdrawal from the family.

The RACGP Training Program includes core training in patient centred consultation. This includes topics such as general counselling and risk rating for suicide. Other more specific Mental Health training is included in elective training.

Position of the RACGP

- The College supports the strengthening of the training of GPs in the area of suicide prevention. This will assist GPs to recognise young people who are at risk of suicide, especially those who are depressed or involved in alcohol or drug abuse, and enable the GP to support the young person appropriately.
- Any additional training should take account of the hospital and community role that GPs play in relation to suicide in rural practice. Rural GPs often do not have access to specialised mental health services which are available in metropolitan areas.
- The RACGP considers that it is essential for hospitals to establish protocols and training for hospital staff in the care of those who have attempted suicide. Such protocols should include the need for referral to GPs following hospital discharge.

Recommended Role for Individual GPs

- The College supports action by GPs to reduce the risk of suicide among young people. This action might include involvement in education programmes for young people and their families and the provision of family support especially in country areas.
- It is important for GPs to recognise the young person who may be at risk of committing suicide and to ask about his/her feelings, including those relating to suicide. By enabling the young person to talk about these matters, the GP is providing support and is better able to assess the patient's risk.
- The GP should be able to refer the young person, where appropriate, to further sources of assistance, such as counselling, youth support agencies, or psychiatric advice.
- Every opportunity should be taken for effective follow up of young people who have been treated in hospital following a suicide attempt.

Strategies

- The RACGP is collaborating with the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatry to re-examine and enhance the training of GPs in the area of Mental Health. This will include strengthening training so that GPs are better able to support young people at risk of suicide.

References

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