

Suicide by burning—a current epidemic

Until recently suicide by burning has been unusual in Western countries. In England and Wales it accounted for less than 1% of suicides in 1963-77 and averaged only 19 cases per year. Nevertheless, between October 1978 and March 1979 there have been 42 deaths in England and Wales where a coroner has recorded the cause of death as being suicide by burning (see table). This method is not uncommon

Suicide by burning

	Period	No	Period	No
1963..	6	1974..	22
1964..	18	1975..	26
1965..	17	1976..	22
1966..	3	1977..	23
1967..	10	October 1978	8
1968..	15	November 1978	9
1969..	22	December 1978	6
1970..	22	January 1979	8
1971..	18	February 1979	3
1972..	31	March 1979	8
1973..	32		

Figures for October 1978-March 1979 exclude late notifications.

among suicide victims of Asian or African origin: in one Israeli series 77% of completed suicides among women born in Asia and Africa were by burning.¹ The same authors found that proportionately 10 times as many women as men chose this method. The current epidemic appears to date from two suicides at the beginning of October 1978. On 2 October a 24-year-old member of the Ananda Marga Sect set fire to herself on the lawn in front of the Palais de Nations in Geneva as a protest against the gaoling of the founder of the movement.² Two days later a London company director, aged 54, burned herself to death on the banks of the Thames at Windsor; she had been suffering from diabetes and had become depressed at the prognosis of her condition.³

Both suicides attracted wide publicity in the press, which persisted until November, when Dr Richard Fox of the Samaritans called for an embargo on reporting.⁴ Despite an apparent response to Dr Fox's call, the numbers of these suicides has continued at an increased level.

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Methods and results

Since the present epidemic became apparent the reporting coroners have been contacted for relevant details of all persons in England and Wales whose death certificates mentioned suicide or suspicious death by burning. A preliminary analysis of cases which were found to be suicide has been carried out.

Exactly half of the 42 cases were men and half women. Seven of the victims were born outside the United Kingdom. Fourteen of the 21 women but none of the 17 men of known marital state was married. Thirteen of the men and 17 of the women had a known history of psychiatric disturbance and 10 of the men and 12 of the women had been receiving psychiatric care. Psychiatric treatment had been mainly for depression but four of the men had been diagnosed as schizophrenic. In only one out of 36 cases where details were available was there no history of psychiatric or personality disorder.

In none of the cases was there any suggestion that the suicide was intended as a political protest.

Comment

A statistical association has recently been shown¹ between reports of inquests on suicide victims in a local paper and the subsequent suicide of men under 45 years of age; the appropriateness of sensational handling of suicide by the media has again been questioned. It seems reasonable to suggest that at least the choice of method in the suicides reported here was influenced by the publicity surrounding the index cases.

It is too early to say whether burning as a method of suicide has now passed the point of being an occasional aberration in the statistics, but in the meantime it would seem reasonable to encourage the press to take a responsible attitude to the presentation of these cases—which without much doubt must entail very painful deaths and have a profound effect on relatives and friends. A more detailed examination of these cases is in progress.

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¹ Modan, B, Nissenkorn, I, and Lewkowsky, S R, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 1970, **91**, 393.

² *Guardian*, 8 October 1978.

³ *Guardian*, 12 October 1978.

⁴ *The Times*, 24 November 1978.

⁵ Barraclough, B, Shepherd, D, and Jennings, C, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 1977, **131**, 528.

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