

Suicide by cop is preventable?

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The prevention of suicide is highly desirable. But, high desirability does not mean a particular outcome is always possible. Clinical and custodial staff aim to prevent suicide, but when this is not possible, they are frequently criticized by authorities.

The expectation that suicide is always preventable is being encouraged by the new catchphrase: “Zero suicide”, as currently endorsed by agencies and prominent leaders.

‘**Suicide by cop**’ is a suicide method in which the person wanting to die deliberately behaves in a threatening manner to provoke a lethal response from police (Stincelli, 2004). This is not uncommon in the USA, but is less common in Australia.

Example 1

The Australian newspaper (4th Oct) presented a picture of Daniel King (32 years of age) (Cornwall & Ritchie, 2019) - he was wearing a black baseball cap and dark glasses – he was muscled and tattooed, holding a baseball bat and sitting with a bulldog.

It was reported that King had been “fantasizing about killing himself”. One former lover said he wanted his death to be “on the news”. On the day he died he stated on social media that cowards die many times but brave people, only once - he attached a picture of a “gunned-down” celebrity.

About 8.45 pm, King fired a shot from a pump-action shotgun into the front of the Sydney home of a pregnant former girlfriend. He did not go into the house or harm anyone. He then went to the St Mary’s police station and fired on the building, injuring no one. He finally went to the Penrith police station (about 9.35 pm) and also fired on the building. Police arrived in a police vehicle and King fired at the vehicle. One police officer was hit with shotgun pellets in the head (non-fatal injury, the pellets were later surgically removed). King was shot dead by police.

Example 2

The New Zealand media reported that a man was shot dead by the police with the headline: “Community grieves for ‘popular’ man shot dead by police in Kurow, North Otago” (Stuff.co.nz, 2019).

The news item begins by reporting that a man had been shot dead by the police after presenting a gun. The irony is that in the next part of the report it is stated that the police had been called after a man had threatened to hurt himself. Interestingly, in this news report the police implied that this was a tragedy that could not be avoided and were emphatic that the police had followed protocols.

The news report expressed the shock and sadness in the small community, and, a local resident described the man as a popular and respected member of the community.

There are at least two major issues here. First, dealing with suicidality in the community, and second whether the police is equipped to deal with mental health crisis.

One has to read the whole Stuff article to unravel the series of events leading to the headline “man shot dead”. Despite the man showing symptoms of suicidality, “mental illness” is mentioned several times, but, suicide is mentioned only once, indirectly half way through the article, and, in reference to the seriousness of the crisis and to justify police against claims of police’s ineptitude in dealing appropriately with mental illness crisis:

“When police are called to a suicide call-out it is a failure of the mental health system, not police.” Stated the New Zealand Police Association President.

This is a pathetic statement and demonstrates the ignorance of police.

According to the news report, the police was called to the address about 9 pm, they were told the man may have access to a firearm so attending officers were armed as a precaution, they found that the man had a gun and began talking to the officers about 10.50 pm, at about 11.50pm, before armed police arrived, the man confronted police while armed with the firearm and was shot once.

In this news report, it was unclear whether or not the three attending officers had been threatened physically or verbally by the man. Furthermore, the police were unable to confirm whether or not the gun was loaded but they claimed that it was “held and presented at the police”. But unlike the case in example 1, the New Zealand case had not fired his gun.

Conclusion

These examples are not the most efficient way of asking for help but when suicide as a course of action is decided on then it may well be a case of getting the appropriate help or die trying. These events test the frequently uttered faith based statement, “suicide is preventable”. It is most unlikely that Daniel King or the New Zealand case were experiencing a treatment responsive mental illness, and if a conscientious individual had asked them if they were “OK”, their death could possibly have been avoided. In our opinion, these deaths are an example of a suicide not being preventable.

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