

Blaming and suicide: a case and discussion

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Received: 6/3/2022; **Revised:** 8/3/2022; **Accepted:** 10/3/2022

Keywords: Suicide; Suicide prevention; Stress; Law and medicine

[citation: Pridmore, Saxby; Naguy, Ahmed; Pridmore, William. (2022). Blaming and suicide: a case and discussion. DHH, 9(1):https://journalofhealth.co.nz/?page_id=2730].

Abstract

Objective: The drivers of suicide are multiple and diverse. When suicide occurs, there is a tendency for blame to be cast about and, for relevant factors to be overlooked. Our aim was to explore the extensive published material relating to a completed suicide which was blamed on the conduct of agencies responsible for preventing/exposing public sector corruption.

Conclusions: We found blame was directed toward the agencies for the manner in which the investigation was conducted, which may or may not be justified. However, we concluded insufficient consideration had been given (in the public discourse) to the consequences of adverse legal findings which will probably negatively influence health and social outcomes.

Introduction

The reaction to suicide can include the justified or unjustified blaming of closely or distantly involved people [1,2]. Doctors, police and custodial officers are often blamed for not having recognized and responded to so-called warning signs.

This is not surprising given that globally official suicide prevention strategies persist on a one dimensional and simplified view that suicide is the result of a mental illness. Naturally, when a suicide occurs, questions arise as to why the suicide was not prevented given the persisting “expert” knowledge. Obviously, such a situation will demand to blame someone or something for the failure to prevent suicide.

In this article, a case will be described in which blame was directed toward an agency responsible for preventing and exposing public sector corruption, and an overseeing/supervisory body. The case will then be discussed with a view to identifying important aspects.

Case description

Currently, in Victoria (Australia), there is much blaming of the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) and a monitoring agency: the Victorian Inspectorate (VI). This arises from perceived failings of the IBAC during Operation Sandon – a probe into allegedly corrupt land deals involving former City of Casey councilors and a property developer. (The City of Casey is a local government area in Victoria, Australia, in the outer south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne.)

Amanda Stapledon (58 years) was the mother and sole carer of a disabled adult son. She was a City of Casey councilor from 2008 to 2020. She was Deputy Mayor in 2013/14 and 2017/18, and Mayor in 2012/13 and 2018/19. Her council work was extensive and energetic.

She was also active in other community work: she was the co-founder of a children's club and patron of both the Cranbourne Football Club all Abilities Team and the YMCA Open Doors Program. For many years she hosted her own radio program, "Women of Today", on Casey radio. She was a Liberal Party state election candidate in 2014.

At her funeral she was remembered by family, friends, faith leaders and colleagues as "a tireless person who always put others first" [3].

Ms Stapledon was one of a group of former City of Casey councilors investigated by IBAC during Operation Sandon. Public hearings were held during the latter part of 2019 and the early part of 2020. The findings were expected to be released in 2022.

The IBAC heard that Ms Stapledon failed to declare many thousands of dollars in political donations from the developer over many years - during this period the council was considering planning matters which would provide financial gain to that developer. Ms Stapledon confirmed that during 2014 she failed to declare a \$25 000 contribution by the developer to her parliamentary election campaign. A full account of the evidence is currently unavailable, and irrelevant as we are not attempting to determine the presence/absence or the magnitude of any wrongdoing. Some further details are available [4], and full details (police report and coroner's inquest) will become available in due course.

Ms Stapledon received a draft of the IBAC report "detailing findings against her" [5] in January 2022, and three days later was found dead in her car. A Coroner has not made a finding, but the police have described the death as 'not suspicious', and the media and citizens have concluded/stated she died by suicide. As this is the public view it is reasonable to accept it as a provisional conclusion (acknowledging a final determination will be made by a Coroner).

Much of the blaming of the IBAC focuses on the format of the investigation, that it was inquisitorial in style and conducted in a public setting. (A representative of the IBAC has stated that "public examinations" are an important part of routine investigations [6].) The VI has been strongly criticized for not responding in a preferred and timely manner to concerns regarding the wellbeing of some of those who appeared before the IBAC. An investigation into the actions of the IBAC and VI by the Integrity and Oversight Committee (IOC) is probable [7].

The Australian newspaper reported the opinion of an ex-politician who had written to the IBAC in 2020, stating, "the damage caused by public hearings using inquisitorial questioning was more harmful to witnesses and their families than any punishment that could be metered out by a court", and "For goodness sake hold these inquiries out of the public eye so that the hyenas of the media do not tear these people apart". This complainant also stated that a number of others who had appeared before IBAC had subsequently experienced suicidal thoughts [6].

A friend of Ms Stapleton was reported as saying, "A woman is dead. Who is going to hold the IBAC and the VI accountable for that?" and another as saying, "In Operation Sandon, IBAC acted as judge, jury and executioner and the VI sat back and watched" [7]. Another person who had been investigated stated, "I and other witnesses had our lives vindictively and mercilessly decimated by the irresponsible conduct of IBAC" [8]. At Ms Stapledon's

funeral her friend and former vicar told mourners, “There are many questions that could be asked, such as ... what should be expected from those who conduct corruption enquiries” [3].

Ms Stapledon is reported to have said that if charged, she believed the legal fees for her defense would be in the order of \$400 000. The only way to meet this expense would be to sell her home, which she wished to retain for her disabled son. A friend is reported as saying, “She’s done this (taken her life) to save (her son) a home” [6].

Discussion

People facing all forms of legal sanction, especially imprisonment, are at increased risk of completing suicide. For example, Dr Harold Shipman, a British General Practitioner convicted of killing 200 plus patients was held in prison. After exhausting all possible appeal processes, he stated he intended to take his life, and despite the best possible care, did so (in 2004). Jeffrey Epstein, an American financier and convicted sexual predator, was arrested on new charges and placed in the Metropolitan Correctional Center (Manhattan) awaiting trial. He hanged himself (in 2019). Two Canadian teenagers went on a killing spree (killing one Australian, among others). Pursued and with capture imminent, they shot themselves (in 2019). Australian examples include Bob Collins, a Senator for the Northern Territory, when charged with pedophilia he died by overdose (in 2007), and James Griffin, a Tasmanian nurse, when charged with the same offence, died by the same means (in 2019).

The crimes detailed in the above paragraph are more serious and quite distinct from the matters examined in Operation Sandon. Nevertheless, all those caught up as defendants in legal investigations may face (depending on the final legal determinations) distressing consequences including loss of income and large legal expenses, loss of status/honor and future opportunities, and feelings of guilt/remorse.

For a couple of generations, we have been lectured that all suicide is the result of mental disorders and that they can be prevented by appropriate medical care. However, this belief has recently been described by the WHO as ‘a myth’ [9]. While some people complete suicide as a result of mental disorder, many complete suicide because their lives have become unacceptable due to losses/unwanted events. In addition to the unpalatable consequences arising from legal difficulties (mentioned above), people find life unacceptable when loved ones leave a relationship or die, when fortunes and celebrity disappear and when chronic painful illness makes life insufferable.

Ms Stapledon ended her life three days after she received the IBAC draft report. This may suggest the adverse findings influenced her decision. There may, of course, have been other factors quite distinct from the corruption enquiry, of which we know nothing.

The IBAC has been blamed by some for this death. The argument includes that public hearings are excessively stressful - “what the IBAC process unleashes is more devastating than any punishment that may be reasonably metered out” [6].

The “inquisitorial questioning” during Operation Sandon may have been more testing than that of other IBAC operations, or inquisitorial questioning may, by nature, be more stressful than other forms of investigation – to preserve public confidence, these possibilities deserve consideration. However, as the IBAC made findings against Ms Stapledon, the style of questioning would be only part of the stress she experienced. Other possible reasons have

been mentioned above and include loss of resources and reputation, concern for the wellbeing of a loved one, and a sense of guilt/remorse.

Ms Stapledon's friend may have been correct in saying that death was chosen to protect the wellbeing of another. This idea appears in fiction – in 'A Tale of Two Cities', a character states, "It is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done", and accepts the guillotine to protect others. Every military force has stories of men who have temporarily held back an overwhelming enemy, sacrificing their lives to allow their countrymen to escape. In 1912, the Antarctic explorer, Laurence Oates, was ill and slowing down his friends' race to safety. He said, "I am just going outside, and I may be some time" and wandered off to die alone.

Completed suicide is often a means of escape from adverse events. This case illustrates a common response to suicide – the attempt to place full responsibility for the death at the feet of those who were close at hand. Grueling, unnecessarily harsh courtroom questioning (not yet established in this case) can be distressing. However, to this point, the opinions expressed in the newspapers have overlooked that adverse legal finding may have personal/social/professional/resources consequences which can negatively influence behavior and outcomes.

[An aside - This death does not appear to be the consequence of a mental disorder. Some form of social support may have altered the outcome. However, this person had many friends and in many ways was well connected. However, we cannot be sure of the probable change in the Case's perception of her social support, in particular, of her social network's loyalty due to the IBAC report.]

Funding statement: This work did not receive any money from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: The authors have no conflicts of interests.

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