

Call-in show raises issues about suicide

What should be included by media?

by Geoff Kennedy

for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — On a recent rural call-in radio program, representatives of social service agencies showed more consensus on how to report suicides than did representatives of the news media.

The media should avoid "glamorizing" suicides, said David Baum of the Maniilaq Association, the Kotzebue-based regional non-profit corporation.

"What message are we giving to other people, particularly the youth who may be suicidal out there?" he asked.

Baum expressed concern about basketball tournaments and races named after persons who have committed suicide.

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"Even though it's no one's intent, it does glamorize suicide, and then the media cover this event," he said. "Even though the person who has committed suicide won't be around to witness it, it's very flattering to be honored in such a way, and one can't help but wonder how much that could entice other people in following the same path."

Bethel Police Sgt. John Abrant had similar concerns.

"As far as I am concerned, publicizing these things can result from a false perceived romanticism," Abrant said. "It is my very strong belief that the more anonymous that incident is on the radio, TV, newspaper, whatever, the better."

Jim Wood of the North Slope Borough Department of Public Safety was also concerned with so-called "copy-cat" suicides. In his experience, the act of reporting suicides tends to encourage other persons to do the same, Wood said.

Daniel Bill of the Bethel-based Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. agreed with Baum and Wood. He and the health corporation board suggest radio and television stations identify the village where the suicide happened, but report the event only once and avoid identifying the suicide victim.

When reporting suicides, it is very important to consider the family, Bill said.

"They are going through a lot of stress, and their wishes should be known," Bill said.

Bill was echoing Baum's sentiments.

"There's a tremendous amount of pain and anguish that a family member goes through after a suicide, and often by printing the name and the fact that it was a suicide only adds to the family's anguish," Baum said.

Wood also opposed referring to a self-inflicted death as a suicide. A good number of alleged suicides are accidental deaths, Wood said.

The manager of Nome radio station KNOM, Tom Busch, agreed. KNOM employs a policy of not using the word suicide to describe apparently self-inflicted deaths, Busch said. In fact, for a long time, KNOM did not even report apparently self-inflicted deaths, Busch said.

"We were afraid of the 'copy-cat' syndrome, and we do understand the tremendous anguish the families of the victims suffer, but after several years, after seeing so many people apparently killing themselves, as a group, we

came to the sense that it was our obligation to report these things," Busch said. "We felt we were derelict to pass over these events. Every single one of these events is significant and extremely serious."

KNOM does not report such events as frequently as other events, but it does name the victim, Busch said.

"That was an agonizing decision at one point, but one of our functions and one of our important obligations to our listeners is to disseminate correct information," he said. "I think one of the functions of a news agency anywhere, and especially here, is to try to dispel rumors."

The news director of Bethel radio and television station KYUK also believes she has the obligation to report such events to listeners and viewers.

"We need to give information so they can make good decisions about what's going on in the community," said Rhonda McBride.

Audiences also need to know whether a sudden death was a murder or a suicide, McBride said.

"There's a public safety issue in-

volved. It could appear to be a suicide. It might not be, and a lot of times when people hear about a death, they wonder about why it happened and fear that there might be some safety problem for themselves."

KYUK will not release the name of the victim unless the person is a public figure.

The Kotzebue radio station takes a similar approach, said KOTZ news director Mark Anderson.

Anderson is also concerned about the "copy-cat" problem.

"It's a tough question and usually the public's right to know prevails," Anderson said. But reporting any public safety issue risks a "copy-cat" response, he argued.

Last month the radio station considered whether reporting vandalism at Chukchi College would encourage similar vandalism, but eventually decided to run the story and invited people to report information about the event to the police, Anderson said.

The *Arctic Sounder* prints all the available information about apparent suicides, said Stacey Lee, who edits the Kotzebue newspaper.

Lee does not believe reporting suicides encourages people to do the same.

"I don't believe there's a statistical basis for that," she said. "If anything, this argument to me is meant to censor the media."

The news director at McGrath radio station, KSKO, Mike Lane takes a very different approach.

"I don't cover too many of them, and I don't cover them as suicides," he said. "Certain criteria have to be met before you cover it: Does it affect the public? Did it happen in a public place?"

"There are myriad problems that would lead an individual to go through the act of suicide. The problem isn't suicide in my mind."

"I would report on the fact that there are problems with alcohol, problems with unemployment, problems with domestic violence," he said.

"Suicide is what I see to be a symptom of those problems. So, reporting that someone has committed suicide is not in any way enlightening people to the fact that they have problems in their community," he said.