

## Suicide contagion

It's been called suicide contagion or cluster deaths – the phenomenon of Indigenous people, particularly men from the same community taking their own lives at an alarming rate. CDU researcher Leonore Hanssens is driven to discover why this is occurring and how it can be stopped.



TEXT  
Ron Banks

PHOTOGRAPH  
Barry Ledwidge

In the decade from 1996 to 2006 there were 180 Indigenous suicides in the Northern Territory, 91 per cent of them young, usually married men. Not one person aged over 50 was discovered to have committed suicide during that decade, making it a young person's phenomenon.

In many cases a single suicide would seem to precipitate a series of copy-cat suicides – other men who take their own lives in similar circumstances, perhaps several months apart within the same community.

It appeared there was a contagion effect at work – the feeling that one death stimulated others to do the same. It is called a contagion because it appears to be a linked series of events that fed off each other, like some sort of infectious disease.

Preliminary research evidence tends to suggest these Indigenous men may already be clustering together in groups of unemployed, disenfranchised people with little else to do with their time.

For Charles Darwin University doctorate researcher Leonore Hanssens the riddle of why young Indigenous men would commit suicide with such frequency that it could be called a contagion needed to be answered.

'What's surprising is the newness of this phenomenon in remote regions,' says Hanssens. For reasons still unknown suicides began to be common from the early 1990s.

Historically, it was uncommon to discover an Indigenous suicide in any community across northern Australia and the term 'suicide contagion' is a term only recently coined in Australia.

Among the first media reports of such a phenomenon was an incidence in the 1960s when evidence began to emerge of a series of suicides by members of the New York police force. It became apparent that the deaths were linked to policemen under investigation during a wide-ranging crackdown on corruption in the force.

Since then, however, suicide contagion as a modern, Western phenomenon has emerged as most prevalent among impressionable and emotionally vulnerable teenagers, particularly those affected by the teen culture of films, music and the other entertainment fads of their age group.

For instance, when Marilyn Monroe committed suicide in 1962, the US suicide rate increased by 12 per cent, according to a report in the *New York Times*.

When the incidence of suicides in Indigenous communities began to rise in Australia, they caught the attention of the media, who had already been on the alert for such news since the extensive media coverage of the Aboriginal deaths in custody inquiry of the late 80s.

As the suicides continued, the fear grew that media reporting of such deaths could even be a contributing factor. This led the more responsible media agencies to stop reporting them. There are however, still occasional reports in the media, usually of the suicide of a well-known Indigenous figure or someone linked to a particular event.

To gain a better understanding of suicides in Indigenous communities in Australia, Leonore Hanssens began by scouring through coroner's records and was the first researcher in the Northern Territory to gain access to the reports of coronial inquiries, which are now contained on a digital database called the National Coroner's Information System (NCIS).

RIGHT  
Tiwi Burial totems.

PHOTOGRAPH  
Courtesy of  
Leonore Hanssens

This system allowed her to establish a firm statistical base on which to continue her research into the phenomenon – and the statistics are worrying.

Suicides in the Northern Territory in 2004 were double the national figure, with 24.3 suicides per 100,000 people, compared to 12.4 suicides per 100,000 of the rest of the population. It was down slightly from 2002, when the death rate from suicide was 28 per 100,000.

Even more worrying – if you look purely at male Indigenous suicide rates – in 2002 the Indigenous male suicide rate was 66.3 per 100,000.

‘This information has provided a sound foundation of understanding, but it really doesn’t come close to providing an insight into the emotional factors that led many to end their lives,’ explains Hanssens.

This year she will continue her research at CDU, with a new phase of investigation – interviewing Indigenous families to compile what are known as ‘psychological autopsies’. As the name implies the autopsy aims to uncover some of the social, emotional and psychological roots of suicide.



It’s a delicate area for any researcher to venture into, but at the same time it can provide an emotional outlet for families already traumatised by losing a loved one.

‘The typical suicide victim in Indigenous communities is aged between 15 and 45 and is usually an unemployed married man with children,’ she explains. ‘In compiling the psychological autopsies the grief of the families seems to tumble out. It can be a therapeutic experience for many of them, who may not have spoken before about their grief.’

‘What we do know already is that feelings of shame and humiliation have led to many of the suicides. These are men with a family and they feel a sense of hopelessness because there is no work to support them in their community.’

‘Imagine being a young, family man with no job, no money and no future and all there is to do is sit around and drink alcohol with your mates and maybe smoke ganja. The devastating effect of alcohol and drugs cannot be underestimated in cases of suicide. A recent study in the NT reported that in 71 per cent of suicide cases alcohol and drug use was recorded.’

Hanssens says suicide in communities should be seen as a social issue with roots in the economic dispossession of Indigenous people. However, it had become ‘medicalised’ as a mental health problem in much of the previous research, which prevented the problem being examined in a wider context.

‘I want to explore the social factors,’ she says. ‘If we don’t help the men or we ignore their problems and concentrate mostly on support for women and children then the problem will only get worse and will result in cultural disintegration of these communities. We need strong Indigenous men to be our next generation of fathers, husbands and role models to other younger men.’