

PLAIN ENGLISH SUMMARY 4

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This is a plain English summary of an article directly associated with PABBS evidence-based and evaluated suicide bereavement training.

'We're the First Port of Call' – Perspectives of Ambulance Staff on Responding to Deaths by Suicide: A Qualitative Study

*By Pauline Nelson, Lis Cordingley, Navneet Kapur, Carolyn Chew-Graham, Jenny Shaw, Shirley Smith, Barry McGale and Sharon McDonnell**

1. What did we know already?

Before the study, the research team already knew that being exposed to suicide increases the risk of a person dying by suicide themselves. We also knew that ambulance staff experience stressful situations as part of their work, including attending suicides. This might mean that they have a higher risk of mental health problems or of dying by suicide. However, we did not know about ambulance staff's experiences of attending a suicide, and whether they feel well prepared to respond to bereaved families at the scene of a death like this.

2. What did we want to find out?

We wanted to know about ambulance staff's experiences of dealing with deaths by suicide and responding to bereaved families at the scene.

3. What did we do?

Ambulance staff who had attended the scene of a death (or deaths) by suicide were invited to talk to us about their experiences of dealing with these situations and responding to bereaved parents. In 2014, we had in-depth conversations with 9 ambulance staff (six male and three female), from one ambulance service in England. We combined all the information from these conversations and sorted it to find the main views and experiences of the ambulance staff that talked to us.

4. What did we find?

Ambulance staff told us that their job could be stressful. They mentioned in particular the strain of working in a service where some of their own work colleagues had died by suicide and others were thinking about taking their own lives.

All the ambulance staff had been personally bereaved by suicide and attending suicides was a common part of their work. This was distressing, but staff described burying their feelings so that they could get on with the job. They were often the first professionals at the scene of a death by suicide and had many different tasks. These included having to tell people about the death of a family member and dealing with their intense emotional reactions, as well as having to protect the scene of the death until police arrived. Staff had long-lasting, vivid memories of these deaths, but there was no recognition in the workplace that suicides were traumatic events. There was no guidance for staff on how to cope afterwards and no training in how to respond to individuals bereaved by suicide at the scene of deaths like this.

5. What does this mean?

Attending the scene of a death by suicide is extremely difficult for ambulance staff. It can have a deep personal and professional impact. Employers need to support the wellbeing of their ambulance staff. One way is to provide enough training and support to help staff cope with stressful events and situations and enable them to respond in better ways to bereaved individuals at the scene of deaths by suicide.

* See full report of the study

Suicide Bereavement UK's website

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