**Suicide on Guam: Putting it in Historical Perspective**

The death of an adolescent is always tragic, but a self-inflicted one is especially so. We lament that a young life was extinguished before it could realize its potential. The tragedy is intensified by the realization that the young suicide victim chose death over life. His death was most often preventable. If only we had been able to get to him in time!

You who are reading this manual are clearly committed to helping control a problem that claims dozens of young lives a year on Guam, and even more on the neighboring islands of Micronesia. You are all the more equipped to help the better you understand and the extent of the suicide problem and some of the factors that contribute to this serious problem in these islands. For that reason, we would like to share with you what we know about the patterns of suicide on Guam and the historical context of this problem. As your understanding of the background of this problem deepens, we have confidence that you will sense how best to apply the tools and recommendations in this manual to prevent the spread of this plague in our community.

Suicide, legend tells us, has had a long history on Guam. One of the island’s most prominent landmarks is Puntan dos Amantes, the site of a double suicide hundreds of years ago that is memorialized in a statue of two lovers leaping to their death together. The historical record of suicide on Guam extends back to the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to a chronicle kept by a priest at that period. From that journal we learn that between 1857 to 1891, a period of 34 years, there were a total of 18 suicides. This averages to about one suicide every two years, or a rate of 8 per 100,000.

Notwithstanding the romantic legends, the suicide rate remained low throughout the first half of the twentieth century and the years following the war. During the fifteen-year period between 1955 and 1969, there were no more than a handful of suicides each year on Guam–an average of four a year. The rate was only 6 per 100,000, roughly the same as that in the rest of Micronesia and just half the rate of the US during that period.

The rate of suicide crept upward during the 1970s and 1980s, with the average number of suicides rising to 14, and a rate of almost 11 per 100,000 by the end of the 1980s. Meanwhile, the suicide problem was growing to epidemic proportions in the other islands of Micronesia. From the late 1970s right up to the present the suicide rate in FSM, Palau and the Marshalls has hovered between 25 and 30 per 100,000, giving the area one of the highest rates in the world.

During the 1990s Guam’s suicide rate took a dramatic leap upward. During the year following the much publicized suicide of ex-governor Ricky Bordallo at the end of January 1990, the number of suicides on Guam nearly doubled. By the end of this decade, the island had an average of 30 suicides a year. The rate now was over 19 per 100,000–not quite as high as the rate of suicide in the neighboring islands of Micronesia, but twice the rate that Guam had enjoyed during the 1980s.

The suicide problem on Guam has grown enormously in recent years. In the early 1960s there were only four or five suicides a year. By the end of the 1990s Guam was showing an average of 30 a year. The increase in suicides had risen much more sharply than the island population, which had doubled in those years, so that Guam’s suicide rate jumped from 6 to about 20 per 100,000.

Why the sharp rise in suicides? There could be many factors contributing to the suicide increase. In many places, stories of suicides seem to invite others who are having problems to do the same thing. Suicide often seems to act like a contagious disease, passing from one person to another and claiming many lives in a short period of time. What can be called “cluster suicides” sometimes occur after the death of a close friend or relative, or an admired public figure. This seems to have happened after the notorious Bordallo suicide in 1990. Another factor may be the growing immigration from other islands in Micronesia since the late 1980s when the Compact of Free Association went into effect. During the last three years, 19 of the victims were from the Federated States of Micronesia.

The great majority of victims, however, are Guamanians. Most are young; the average age of victims is in their 20s. Male suicides outnumber female suicides by more than ten to one on Guam, an imbalance that is also found in the US and in other Micronesian islands. The method of suicide is by hanging in over half the cases, while guns account for a third of the suicides.

Most of the recent suicides in Guam have been brought on by a crisis in interpersonal relationships–perhaps a teenage love affair that has ended, a marriage that has gone bad, or a youth angry at what he believes to be unfair treatment by his parents. In a few cases the victim appears to have sought death as an escape from the shame of personal failure or punishment. A damaged or destroyed personal relationship leads to suicide on Guam, just as it does in the rest of Micronesia, far more frequently than any other cause.

Some suggest that the recent upswing in suicides is, in good part, due to the social changes that have accompanied modernization on Guam. Such claims are not easy to substantiate. Yet, it may be productive to ask ourselves just which of the many changes in lifestyle over the past twenty or thirty years may have contributed to the suicide problem–by rendering youth more vulnerable to threatened personal relationships, by removing the institutions and practices that would have protected them in the past, and by denying them the satisfactions that they once enjoyed.

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