Risk Factors for Suicide in Wives of Military Personnel

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Abstract

Background: An increasing trend in attempted and completed suicide amongst wives of serving personnel was observed.

Methods: A questionnaire designed to elicit the known risk-factors for suicide, suicide attempts and suicidal ideation by women in the Indian context was administered to 222 wives of Indian military personnel living in a garrison with their husbands.

Result: A large number (28%) of the sample were child-less. Alcoholism in husband was reported by 22 women and domestic violence by four. Six had been bereaved in the past year. Chronic illness was reported by 10 women and psychiatric illness by four.

Conclusion: Wives of military personnel may need targeted community interventions focusing on the risk factors for suicide.

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Key Words: Suicide; Community; Risk-factors; Wives of military personnel

Introduction

Several studies have suggested that stresses of military life can induce psychiatric illness in the families of armed forces personnel. Separation, transiency and differential parenting have been implicated as predisposing factors for the “military family syndrome”. Loneliness, fears about the soldier's safety, ignorance of the place of deployment, problems with communications and rumours are frequently cited by families [1-5]. In the Indian Armed Forces, the wives of serving personnel have access to welfare activities including social support, health and family planning, vocational training, housing and financial assistance. The officials in a military garrison sought advice for interventions after noting a worrying trend of attempted suicide and completed suicide, amongst wives of serving personnel. There is no study available on the risk factors for suicide in wives of military personnel in India. A review of risk factors for suicide was also done [6].

Material and Methods

A short questionnaire was prepared in order to elicit the following information; alcoholism in the husband; reports of domestic violence; chronic physical illness; recent bereavement; treatment for a psychiatric illness now or in the past and number of children. The questionnaire was mailed to the army units in the garrison with a letter explaining the risk factors and responses analysed.

Results

A total of 222 responses were received from wives of officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and other ranks. The sample was community based and fairly representative

of the ranks of the personnel. The number of respondents without children were large, since they get priority for accommodation and hence over-represented in the population. The relative frequency of the various risk factors elicited is given in Table 1.

Discussion

Suicide is the final outcome of a complex web of cause and chance. Studies have identified several empirical risk-factors for suicide, which may differ significantly based on the character of the population being studied. Admittedly, these risk-factors have been of very little value in the clinical/bedside assessment of suicide risk. However, many of these factors may serve as good, though non-specific screening items in a sample of general population [6].

Domestic strife in some form is a significant factor in suicide and suicide attempts, especially among women [7, 8]. Domestic violence has been a long-standing problem for United States active duty personnel and military veterans [9]. Many Western studies have reported increased prevalence of spousal aggression in both male and female soldiers [9,10]. In the Indian context commonly the relationships disturbed are those with the husband and the mother-in-law [8]. Other factors are psychiatric illness, chronic physical illness, recent bereavement, inability to have children and harassment for dowry [8,11]. The wives of alcoholics frequently resort to suicidal behaviour, as a response to their husbands' maladaptive behaviour [12]. Domestic violence was a frequent precipitant in such cases [13]. A recent study, identified chronic physical pain or illness

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Table 1

Risk factors for suicidal behaviour in wives of military personnel (n=222)

Risk factor	Frequency	Percentage
No children	63	28
Alcoholism in husband	22	10
Chronic physical illness	10	4.5
Recent bereavement	06	2.7
Domestic violence	04	1.8
Mental illness	04	1.8

Note: Some respondents reported more than one risk-factor

as a significant risk factor for suicide attempts [14]. Suicidal ideators, who represent a part of the suicidal spectrum, commonly manifest psychiatric illness, chronic physical illness and grief when assessed [15].

This study could provide the basis for certain suggestions to local commanders and incorporating preventive measures for those at risk. A comprehensive suicide prevention programme should be evolved after studying the social context, culture, prevalent psychopathology, perceived stressors, vulnerabilities and triggers for that community [16].

This study is however only an exercise in community needs assessment and programme development for community mental health interventions. A full-scale and ongoing, epidemiological investigation will become possible if a formal programme is in place. A community mental health team of psychologists and social workers, with the local military authorities providing a secretariat and other resources could implement and integrate this preliminary framework into the organisational agenda.

Preventive and social interventions for the mental health of families of military personnel have great potential, to contribute to the morale and efficiency of the organisation. Community studies and interventions for suicide can yield valuable insights into the community's mental health needs and its social imperatives [17].

Conflicts of Interest

None identified

Intellectual Contribution of Authors

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