

The success at Foyle Search and Rescue – Suicide prevention and rescue in the city of Derry, Ireland

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Introduction

Where recorded, drowning is the method of choice in between 3% and 26% of all suicide deaths worldwide with a likelihood that there is under-reporting in some countries for cultural reasons (3). Ireland has a serious suicide by drowning problem (1,2). Most lifesaving organisations do not include suicide deaths in their statistics, possibly because there is a belief that such deaths are not preventable (4). Foyle Search and Rescue (FSR) was established in the City of Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1993, with the aim of reducing the high number of suicide by drowning deaths in the River Foyle. FSR operates a successful voluntary prevention and rescue service, proving that it is possible to make a permanent positive impact into this aspect of the global drowning problem.

Aim

To demonstrate the reduction of suicide drownings that was achieved in the City of Derry due to the work of FSR.

Prevention, Rescue and Treatment

The organisation operates out of a purpose built headquarters upriver and a secondary boathouse downriver and has three linked strategies: 1) Prevention: From 9.30pm to 3.00am on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights a team of three trained volunteers, supported by a mobile unit, patrol the river bank between the old low level Craigavon Bridge and the new high level Foyle Bridge. Their aim is to intercept anyone entering the river and to bring them back to their headquarters where a trained member will speak with them. They also check the condition of riverside lifebuoys during the patrol. Lifebuoys at key locations are alarmed and monitored by cameras. 2) Rescue: Rescue boats are located upriver and downriver ready to respond immediately on duty nights and on call-out from the police at other times. 3) Treatment: The organisation has links with medical services and mental health and bereavement support groups, some of whom meet weekly at their headquarters.

Results

In the 18 months prior to the establishment of FSR in 1993, there were at least 25 deaths in the river. On the other hand, in the 17 years since 1993 only 74 persons are known to have drowned in the Foyle; FSR volunteers have responded to over 1700 incidents, rescued 129 people from drowning and recovered 74 bodies. Over 1000 people have been led away from the river by foot patrols and less than 1% of them are known to have subsequently died by suicide. Today between 3–5 persons drown annually in the Foyle.

Conclusions

This case example of activities undertaken by FSR, demonstrates that a remarkable reduction of suicide drowning deaths has been achieved within a 17-year period. Future study of other search and rescue services operating in other regions of Ireland, are hoped to correspond to these results, proving that prevention, rescue and treatment can act as a positive factor in suicide drowning death reduction.

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