

K35 Monitoring of Specialized Internet Forums to Ensure Complete Toxicology Testing in Suicide Death Investigations

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have learned about the utility of accessing specialized web-based forums to stay current about real-time drug and substance use trends in the pro-suicide community.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating how frequent review of member posts on specialized internet forums can be utilized to ensure that suicide death investigations include appropriate toxicology testing and scene investigation.

Suicide is a leading cause of death in the United States. The United States Department of Health and Human Services reported in 2019 that 47,173 people deaths were attributed to intentional self-harm (suicide) and this was the tenth leading cause of death in 2017. Out of these deaths, 6,554 were categorized as Poisoning Suicides.¹ One of the challenges associated with toxicology testing is to ensure that the analysis performed is designed to identify the agents that are commonly used to commit this act. While data monitoring of laboratory findings in this population is one mechanism that can be used for this purpose, inherent risk is associated with this approach. This is because an assessment of this type only provides positive findings and does not include substances that were excluded in the scope of analysis. Another more non-traditional approach is to utilize web-based forums to learn what substances people are planning to use or are inquiring about to commit suicide.

One such forum is called Sanctioned Suicide, which describes itself as “a pro-choice suicide community that discusses mental illness and suicide from the perspective of suicidal people, as well as the moral implications of the act itself.” Forum statistics in October 2020 show 45,838 threads, 853,180 messages, and 16,032 members. Registration is only required to post and send private messages, so forum posts are visible to non-registered users. Sanctioned Suicide has a section dedicated to Methods and another section for Resources; it is these that are frequently evaluated to stay abreast of any new trends or substances that are actively being discussed. At the time of this submission, Sodium Nitrite (SN) is one of the most discussed methods and has its own mega-thread with a detailed “how to” guide. From this example, it is noted that SN is a chemical of interest that would not be identified by routine toxicology testing. Furthermore, members discuss taking an antiemetic such as metoclopramide to prevent vomiting and an antacid to counteract the conversion of SN within the acidic environment of the stomach to a regular salt. This type of surveillance not only provides useful information to toxicology laboratories as they make decisions regarding which tests to develop but is of special relevance to the death investigator. Death investigators will have a greater awareness to look for seemingly innocuous items such as aquarium test strips, which are used to verify the purchased SN contains an appropriate concentration of nitrite.

Suicide is one of the manners of death that can be assigned to a medical examiner or coroner case. It is incumbent upon toxicology laboratories and death investigators to utilize as many avenues as possible, including web-based forums, to ensure a complete and accurate death investigation process.

Reference(s):

¹. *FastStats*. August 4, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/suicide.htm>.

Suicide, Web-Based Forums, Drug and Substance Use