In Australia, one in five people will directly experience a mental illness in their lifetime and many more will experience problems with their mental health. The media has an important role to play in influencing community attitudes towards and perceptions of mental illness.

Research has indicated that for many people the media is their primary source of information about mental illness. According to national and international research, mental illness tends to be portrayed negatively in the mass media, which may influence community attitudes and lead to stigma and a reduction in help-seeking behaviour.

The police and emergency services are important sources for most news organisations. Information is accessible, timely, and viewed as having high human or dramatic interest. The very nature of policing means officers are confronted by mental illness on a regular basis, and these incidents will often be seen as newsworthy. These are challenging cases to handle and media enquiries may be tricky. However, police services have an important role to play in supporting appropriate media coverage.

Australian research has shown that news coverage about mental illness collected at court or from police incidents is problematic. Many of these stories focus on violence or unusual events, and while they relate to specific or rare cases, generalisations are often made about all people experiencing a mental illness.

When interacting with the media, it is important to have an understanding of the potential impact of reporting mental illness and consider your role in the exchange of information.

> For more information about media reporting of suicide, as well as facts and statistics visit **www.mindframe-media.info**

Issues to consider...

■ Consider whether to make a comment

Consider whether you are the most appropriate person to provide comment and what the impact may be of speculating about someone's mental health status. Refer to your media policy for direction and contact your Media Unit for advice and support.

■ Use appropriate language

Be aware of your own language and avoid negative terms such as 'mental patient', 'psycho' or 'schizo'. Use phrases that describe a person's behaviour (e.g. 'unusual' or 'erratic') rather than implying something about their mental health status (e.g. 'crazy' or 'deranged'). Avoid labelling people by their diagnosis e.g. a person is 'living with' or has a 'diagnosis of schizophrenia', they are not a 'schizophrenic'.

■ Clarify language that could be misinterpreted

While correct, some police phrases, such as 'sent for mental health assessment' or 'detained under the Mental Health Act' can be misinterpreted by journalists, and the community, without clarification. Be mindful that language such as 'absconded from hospital' can have connotations of 'danger' or threat to community safety, when this may not be the case.

■ Ensure your interactions do not reinforce common stereotypes

The very nature of policing means there tends to be exposure to people in crisis situations. Consider how these situations may be handled to maintain the person's privacy and dignity and reduce community fear. Research indicates that most people with mental illness have no history of violent behaviour and are more likely to be victims of violence.

■ Get to know local mental health services

Consider whether the local mental health service has experts that may make media comment about mental illness.

Suicide is a significant public health issue in Australia. The media has an important role to play in influencing community attitudes and perceptions of suicide.

The media generally do not report suicide deaths. There are times, however, when journalists will report suicide because it is considered to be 'in the public interest'. This might include cases where the person is well known or the circumstances of the death are in some way unusual or relevant to the community.

People in despair may be influenced by media coverage of suicide, particularly where they identify with the person in the report. Characteristics of reporting associated with increased rates of suicide include: high profile reporting of suicide; detailed description of the method and/or location; reporting of celebrity suicide; and prolonged or repetitive reporting.

While all states and territories have policies regulating police interactions with the media, Australian research has indicated that police services are a major source of information for many media stories about suicide. Police are usually first to examine a scene and, therefore, may be the first to field media enquiries. While this is challenging, it also provides police with an opportunity to support appropriate media coverage of suicide.

When interacting with the media, it is important to have an understanding of the potential impact of reporting suicide and consider your role in the exchange of information.

For more information about media reporting of suicide, as well as facts and statistics visit **www.mindframe-media.info**

Issues to consider...

■ Consider whether to make a comment

If this is a case that is likely to be reported, consider the impact of making any suggestion about the cause of death. Refer to your media policy for guidance about whether to comment, and request assistance from your Media Unit.

■ Consider how much detail to disclose

Avoid discussing details of method and location and suggest the exclusion of this information from stories wherever possible. This may be difficult where it relates to a known location, but detailed description of a suicide death can prompt some vulnerable people to harm themselves as a result.

■ Use appropriate language

Check that your language does not sensationalise suicide or present it as an option for dealing with problems - e.g. use 'non fatal' rather than 'unsuccessful', 'took their own life' or 'died by suicide' rather than 'successful suicide' or 'committed suicide' and use statements such as 'cluster of deaths' rather than 'suicide epidemic'.

■ Refer journalists to the Mindframe website

Journalists follow codes of practice about reporting suicide and should have been directed to the *Mindframe* resources. If asked questions that may lead to reporting of a death, suggest the journalist visit www.mindframe-media.info for further information and advice.

■ Get to know your local support services

If you are concerned that people bereaved by the death may be at risk, including police officers who may have attended the scene, it would be useful to refer them to internal or external counselling and support services.