

MPhil Confirmation Seminar

The University of Melbourne

Media reporting of Robin Williams' suicide

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Supervisors:

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**Thursday 13th December, 3:00pm-4:00pm
Room 410, Level 4, 207 Bouverie Street**



Professor Jane Pirkis is the Director of the Centre for Mental Health at the University of Melbourne. She has worked in the suicide prevention field for nearly 25 years and has a particular interest in reporting and portrayal of suicide in news and entertainment media. She is Vice President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), and was a founding co-Chair of IASP's Suicide and the Media Special Interest Group. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Crisis, and recently co-edited The International Handbook of Suicide Prevention.

There is extensive evidence to suggest that media reporting of suicide can exert a contagion effect, leading to imitative suicidal acts. This is especially likely if reports are prominent, far-reaching, provide explicit details about the method or location of death, and concern individuals with whom audiences identify. Conversely, there is a smaller but increasing evidence base that suggests that framing reports of suicide in certain ways may have a positive impact. For example, there are suggestions that stories that actively address the stigma around depression may encourage help-seeking.

The death of Robin Williams provides a recent example of a celebrity suicide that was widely reported. When the American actor and comedian took his own life on 11 August 2014, the international media coverage was extensive. Little is known about the quality or impact of this reporting however; a handful of studies have been conducted overseas but they have produced inconclusive results. This presentation will describe a project that builds upon previous studies in several ways. It combines an explicit examination of the quality of Australian reporting of Williams' suicide with an assessment of the extent to which that reporting was associated with two outcomes considered in tandem, one negative (i.e., suicide) and the other positive (i.e., help-seeking).