PS for 1/10/91

Suicide Courses are Dangerous to Your Child's Health

Two separate new studies have just concluded that suicide curricula in the schools and made-for-television movies about teen suicide do more harm than good. The evidence produced by these two research projects knocks the props out from under one of the psychological courses that has been a trendy fad in the public schools during the last five years.

Classroom courses and TV movies were "sold" to unsuspecting parents as "suicide-prevention" programs, supposedly designed to help combat the high rate of suicides among teenagers. These two unrelated studies now show that such efforts are "ineffective" in changing attitudes and even produce "unwanted effects."

According to a Columbia University study reported in the December 26 **Journal of the American Medical Association**, researchers found that the school courses stir up suicidal feelings when teenagers discuss the topic openly. Teenagers continued to believe that suicide was a possible solution to their problems, and those who took the course said that "talking about suicide makes some kids more likely to try to kill themselves."

The researchers concluded that "There is a clear need to evaluate such programs to determine their efficacy and safety." The results are seen as a "cause for concern."

Five years ago, there suddenly developed a frenzy to "deal" with the problem of teenage suicide. Government-financed conferences were held, a whole new social service bureaucracy started to form, and some legislatures even mandated that suicide courses be taught in the public schools. It is to be hoped that legislatures and schools will now abandon their folly.

The Columbia University team was headed by David Shaffer, director of the division of child and adolescent psychiatry at the medical schools. It studies the attitudes of students in the 9th and 10th grades who had taken a public-school suicide course.

The suicide and "death and dying" courses given in so many public schools today deal with the subject by having a counselor who had had only 6 to 10 hours of training lead discussions in a classroom setting. The courses are based on the

unproven concepts that suicide is caused by typical teenage stresses and that all teenagers share a potential vulnerability to suicide.

But most teenagers are **not** at risk for suicide and it is dangerous to pretend they are and expose them to classroom discussions about suicide. The Columbia study concluded that, because of the negative reactions to the suicide courses plus the evidence of "imitative or stimulatory effect on suicide behavior" among adolescents, "the practice of addressing such programs to unselected audiences should be viewed with caution."

The second new research project concluded that movies about teenage suicide which purport to caution young people against it may actually have the opposite effect. This is the first systematic analysis of the content of media portrayals of teen suicide.

Dr. Daniel Castellanos, a psychiatrist at the University of Miami and formerly with Columbia University Department of Child Psychology, announced preliminary findings of his analysis of media images of teen suicide. His team of 30 experts on adolescent suicide studied four made-for-television movies about teen suicide which aired in 1985 and 1986: **Surviving, Silence of the Heart, Hear Me Cry,** and **Desperate Exit.**

In the movies, "teenagers who succeeded at killing themselves were portrayed as stronger, more likable people than those who attempted suicide by lived," according to Dr. Castellanos. "In one movie, the boy who killed himself was the football quarterback, was rich, had a girlfriend and his own car. But another boy who attempted suicide and survived was portrayed as a nerd, a longer, someone without friends."

The researchers found that these movies could be considered "dangerous" because they "glamourize, simplify, or otherwise distort the true picture of suicide." They specifically criticized the movies for their detailed descriptions of how to commit suicide, for showing those who commit suicide as adolescent role models, ignoring the harmful consequences of suicide attempts, showing trivial events such as a low exam grade as triggers to suicide, portraying suicide as a means of becoming famous or "getting even," and fostering undeserved guilt among family and friends.

Dr. Castellanos said that the films could be dangerous for some teenagers who "have distorted emotions" and believe that suicide is a ration solution to something

like being angry." Some movies presented suicide in so much detail that they became "how to" episodes.

These two new studies provide the proof for what people with common sense said five years ago. Psychotherapy about a sensitive and volatile subject such as suicide, administered to a class of minor children (each with different emotional makeup) by a "counselor" (i.e., an unlicensed psychologist) who has had a few hours of "training," should be prohibited in the public classroom.