

A program for detection of mental illness and potential prevention of suicide in police officers referring to general physicians for other reasons

Hashem Saberian¹, Motahhar Omrani Sigarudi¹

¹ Department of Mental health, Deputy of Health, Relief, and Treatment, Islamic Republic of Iran Police Headquarters

Background and objective: Occupational circumstances put the police at an increased risk of mental disorders, including suicide. Prevention programs for suicide address different aspects and risk factors related to the mental health of police officers, and are mostly focused on training and education on stress management and mental health promotion. Timely diagnosis and treatment of mental diseases is vital in prevention of suicide. However, mental illness stigma and neglect of mental health assessment by physicians prevent many cases from being detected. Thus, the present study was designed to promote mental health and potentially prevent suicides in police officers referring to physicians for general problems.

Materials and methods: This study was performed on police personnel and persons going through conscription in the national police force of Iran (NAJA). The aim was to detect mental problems or suicidal ideation in those who referred to a general physician (GP) for other complaints. Via face-to-face and videoconference classes held throughout the country, GPs working for NAJA were instructed to evaluate the mental health of all patients regardless of complaint. Moreover, two sets of posters were designed and put up in examination rooms. One was hung behind the physician and encouraged patients to inform their physician of their current mental status, while the other, on the wall facing physicians, reminded them to assess the mental status and suicidal ideation of all patients. Any individual suspected of any mental problem was to be referred to a psychiatrist for further evaluation.

Results: Nine months after initiation of the program, results were evaluated in two groups: persons going through conscription, and police personnel. Among the first group, 1091 were referred, of which 37 were permanently exempted from military service, and 416 were exempted from armed training. Furthermore, 475 police personnel were referred out of which 348 received a health support level, a formal policy in NAJA to accommodate personnel with health conditions. This is while there were very few cases of detection and referral to psychiatrists by GPs in the police force before this study.

Conclusion: Since most cases of suicide are related to psychiatric disease, a wise approach to prevent suicide should include early diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems. The results of this study denote the importance of physician education in early detection of psychiatric problems in police officers of Iran. Further studies are needed to develop and evaluate more comprehensive programs for this challenging issue.