

# Suicide: A Taboo Subject

Early in December Mrs. Alice Pitre was assigned to do an article on suicide and state of mental health facilities in the province of New Brunswick.

Unexpectedly, Mrs. Pitre was confronted by insurmountable obstacles as she pursued her investigation of a single suicide which took place here in Fredericton early last fall. It had been rumoured that the victim had sought professional help and received only minimal treatment before the incident. The intention was to discern whether this case was a result of inefficient medical attention - and thus a reflection of New Brunswick's mental health facilities - or if this case was truly exceptional.

Her findings, as you can read below, point to one certainty: suicide is a taboo subject which nobody, not even the supposed experts, wants to discuss except in the most vague of generalizations.

ALICE J. PITRE

For some students, the most traumatic moments of the term have been associated with midterm papers and exams. But for a woman I met recently who prefers to remain anonymous, trauma consists of watching another jump to her death from the Westmorland Street bridge. The shock of the experience has lingered with her, just as it does with the friends and families of this and other victims of suicide - so much that it remains a taboo subject.

In the first eleven months of the year, Fredericton City Police have eight suicide on record. In 1986, there were ten. Eighteen self-inflicted deaths in two years in

Fredericton alone is far too many, especially when a greater proportion of these are in the age group from the teens to early twenties.

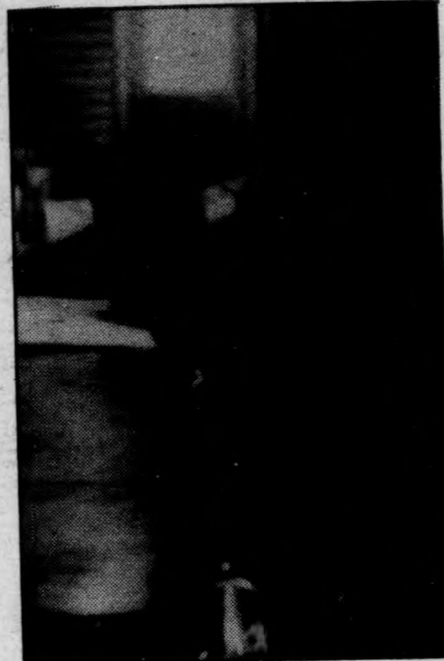
Sergeant Timothy Cane of the Fredericton City Police attributes these youthful suicides to peer pressure, school troubles, and despair over broken relationships. Others, he feels, are the result of Christmas depressions, and after-Christmas bills, the things most of us take for granted.

The Fredericton police work closely with Chimo, providing them with workshops and lectures. In return, Chimo reports all emergency calls to the police, who respond to a suicide in progress.

Section 10 of the Mental

Health Act allows police to detain any individual who appears to be a threat to themselves and to take them to the hospital for treatment and assessment. The police may also call their chaplain, Father Peter O'Hanley, and the Victim Witness Unit, a group of volunteers available day and night, to assist them in the care of victims and their families.

At the Doctor Everett Chalmers Hospital, the suicidal person is given physical treatment as necessary, as well as a psychiatric assessment. Although there is no psychiatrist on the emergency ward, one is always on call. A general practitioner cannot on his refer a patient to the psychiatric ward. Because of



Eighteen people have committed suicide in Fredericton in the last two years.

the limited number of beds, the doctors are faced with the responsibility of deciding which suicide threats are serious and which are merely a bid for attention or an attempt to get in out of the cold.

The DECH psychiatric ward consists of thirty acute care beds, a number that even the

nurses on the floor agree is too few. Diane Morrison, Service Coordinator at the hospital says they are looking for twelve to fifteen additional acute care beds.

Chronic patients are sent to Centracare in Saint John. Nancy Curtis of the NB chapter of the Canadian Mental Health Association does not agree with this policy. She feels that psychiatric patients benefit from being near their families, and that chronic care beds are needed in our own area as well.

Suicide, however, is a topic that few people will discuss. In some households, even the word is taboo. Information about actual suicide cases are a matter of confidentiality to both the police and the medical profession. Sergeant Cane states the suicide is downplayed even in the media for the sake of the families involved.

Discussion of suicide seems to be an admission of defeat and failure. To say a family member passed away suddenly is acceptable. But to say that this person took his own life is to open oneself to guilt.



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