

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Inquiry into suicide prevention – visit to Jacob Abraham Foundation, 21 June 2018

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Background

The Foundation was set up after the death of Jacob Abraham in October 2015; Jacob was aged 24 and took his own life through suicide. Jacob's parents, Nicola and David Abraham, are founding trustees of the foundation.

The Jacob Abraham Foundation aims to help prevent suicide through direct intervention with vulnerable people, raise awareness on mental health/suicide issues, promote positive mental health and support people bereaved through suicide in South Wales.

The Jacob Abraham Foundation's objectives are:

- To provide suicide prevention and intervention training in local communities.
- To support bereaved families post-suicide.
- To educate communities on the issues surrounding male suicide, including leaflets, posters and sign-posting.
- To run preventative programmes/workshops for targeted vulnerable people in the community.

Key points from discussion with Nicola Abraham, Sarah Aitken and service users

Nicola Abraham provided an introduction to the work of the Foundation. She told us about the death by suicide of her son Jacob, and how she subsequently set up the Foundation to provide support to people at risk of or affected by suicide.

Sarah Aitken, the Jacob Abraham Foundation's wellbeing practitioner, told us that the Foundation had provided counselling support to 40 vulnerable individuals at risk of suicide in the last year. Sarah highlighted the potential savings from this type of intervention, given that the cost of each death by suicide is estimated at £1.7 million. The Foundation receives no direct funding and relies on self-fundraising and donations.

Each participant shared their own experience of losing a family member to suicide. Identities and details of individual cases aren't included here for anonymity, but a number of themes emerged which the Committee will wish to take note of. The evidence received during this visit will be very valuable to the Committee when shaping its recommendations.



Support for bereaved families

All participants emphasised the lack of support following the death by suicide of their family member. Many described how, after the initial visit from the police, they were left alone to deal with the aftermath and pick up the pieces.

Participants felt let down; it was highlighted that people receive more support (including from police family liaison officers) when bereaved in other ways, for example as the result of a road traffic accident. This does not seem to be the case when suicide is involved.

Not one had received a copy of Help is at Hand Cymru. Participants said they would have found this a very helpful resource. Nicola Abraham told us that despite attempts, the Foundation was unable to obtain copies from Public Health Wales to give to service users, and has had to rely on the England version which is of more limited benefit to Welsh residents.

Some participants who had sought help from their GP mentioned being referred for counselling and to Cruse Bereavement Care. The long waiting lists for these services were emphasised, with some individuals still waiting to be seen many months later.

All participants valued the support and 'safe space' they'd found at the Jacob Abraham Foundation. The Jacob Abraham Foundation is open to anyone, and people travel from outside Cardiff as there is no similar support available in their own areas. More community-based services – in non-medical settings – are needed. It was noted that all communities have buildings with usable spaces.

The importance of the 'right kind of support' was highlighted – support groups should be properly facilitated, and should not require people to share more of their experience than they are comfortable doing at any given time. People experience the complex grief that follows a suicide in different ways, and have different work and caring commitments which can be a barrier to accessing some existing support services.

Young children bereaved through suicide also need support, including in schools. The benefits of play therapy were highlighted.

Awareness/training

Participants highlighted the stigma and fear that exists around suicide, and that too often, the response from public services is dismissive and lacking in compassion where suicidal behaviour or suicide itself is involved.

There's a need for greater awareness and training among the public and all frontline staff, including how to effectively signpost people to appropriate services. Parents/carers need advice about keeping someone with suicidal thoughts safe.



Support for men

It was highlighted that men are at much greater risk of suicide than women, yet are less likely to seek help. It was notable that all participants in the group discussion were women, and all had lost male relatives. New approaches are needed to encourage help-seeking behaviour among men, as well as to support those bereaved through suicide.

Nicola Abraham described the Foundation's involvement in a Comic Relief-funded project to provide suicide prevention training to tattooists. Tattooists may spend hours with one client and have a relationship of trust, and the project seeks to make the most of that opportunity (in a similar way to the 'Trust me I'm your barber' initiative).

Media reporting of suicide

Some of the participants had experienced intrusive behaviour by the press following the death of their relative. This included reporters making direct contact with family members, obtaining Facebook photos, and writing extensively and sometimes inaccurately about the individual concerned. The reporting often focused on negative aspects of the individual's life (for example, drug use). The impact of irresponsible reporting of a suicide on the family and friends of the deceased is devastating. Online news coverage – which is widely seen and shared – can be particularly damaging, especially where posts are open to public comments.

Substance misuse

There was discussion about whether drug use is a contributing factor to suicide. Some participants were aware that their relative had taken drugs in the period leading up to their death by suicide. Cocaine was involved in a number of cases – there was concern that this drug is very easy to obtain, its use is becoming normalised, and the sleep deprivation associated with taking cocaine may increase the risk of suicide.

