

Do adolescents post social media content indicative of self-harm and intentional poisonings?

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Background: Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents, with 157,000 teens presenting to the Emergency Department (ED) annually after a self-harm or suicide attempt. Self-poisoning is the most common method of self-injury among teens evaluated in the ED. Communication behaviors, including those related to self-harm and suicide, may be changing with the near ubiquitous use of technology among adolescents. This study describes adolescent self-harm and suicide attempts via self-poisoning and explores the use of social media among this population in the time prior to their attempts.

Methods: Patients presenting after a self-poisoning between 9-22 years-old were eligible. After consent, subjects were administered an electronic survey in REDCap regarding their intentions, engagement in social media, recent content posted, and other forms of communication. Electronic medical records were reviewed to gather information on presentation, evaluation, treatment, outcome, and disposition. Additional consent was obtained to review subjects' personal social media accounts.

Results

45 subjects consented to the study thus far, 33 provided access to their personal social media accounts. 30 subjects reported that they wanted to die, 23 subjects expected to die. 36 subjects had abnormal vital signs, QTc was prolonged in 9 subjects, QRS was wide in 2 subjects. 8 subjects received NAC. 22 patients were admitted, 16 to the medical wards, 6 to an ICU. The most common social media platforms used by subjects included Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Three subjects reported posting about self-harm, however, when reviewing social media accounts, several additional subjects commented on feeling depressed, or wanting to die (data not shown). The top reasons given for not posting about this were embarrassment, being a private person, or not thinking others would care.

Conclusion

Despite increased social media utilization, adolescents are telling others about self-harm attempts in person. However, in contrast to what our study population reported, we discovered references to death, dying and depression while reviewing posts by subjects who did not claim to have posted this type of content. Further research is being done on social media content posted by suicidal and depressed adolescents.