

Risk of suicide is high – but not as high as previous estimates

People who experience psychosis are statistically more likely to take their own lives. However, the increased risk of suicide is not as great as mental health professionals and researchers previously thought.

A team from the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, analysed information about nearly 3,000 people – from London, Nottingham, and Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland – who had sought help from mental health services following a first episode of psychosis since the mid-1960s through to 2004. The researchers cross-referenced with national records of deaths to ascertain how many people had killed themselves during the decade after they first became unwell. Deaths were identified using information from the Office for National Statistics in England and Wales and from the General Register Office for Scotland.

Of the 2,723 people included in the research project (whose diagnoses included schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder and psychotic depression), 53, or 1.9 per cent, took their own lives within an average period of 11.5 years after their first episode of psychosis. This is 12 times higher than the suicide rate for the general population of England and Wales.

Previous research studies, however, have suggested that 10-15 per cent of people with psychosis kill themselves.

'Our study shows the widely held view that 10 to 15 per cent of people who have psychosis die of suicide is a misleading and inflated estimate,' said Dr Rina Dutta who led the research. 'However, there is a substantial increase in risk compared to the general population.'

The results showed that the rate of suicide was highest during the first year after diagnosis. But even a decade later, people with psychosis were four times more likely to kill themselves than people who had no experience of a severe mental illness.

'Even though the highest risk occurs during the early stages of the illness, there is a consistently high risk in later years too, and mental health professionals should still be vigilant in assessing risk of suicide a decade or longer after a first episode of psychosis,' said Dr Dutta.

Of the 53 people who took their own lives, 40 were men and 13 were women. There was a difference in the methods men and women used: the most common methods used by men were drowning, hanging, strangulation or suffocation. The most common methods used by women were poisoning and jumping from a high place.

The results of the research were published in a paper called *Reassessing the long-term risk of suicide after a first episode of psychosis* published in the Archives of General Psychiatry, an academic journal, in 2010.

■ Reassessing the long-term risk of suicide after a first episode of psychosis.

Rina Dutta, Robin Murray, Matthew Hotopf, Judith Allardyce, Peter Jones, Jane Boydell. Archives of General Psychiatry, 2010; (67(12): 1230-1237).

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