

Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

**A Supplemental Submission to the  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
Inquiry into Suicide in Australia**

**May 2010**

By

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Dr Jeanine Baker (ph: 0427 186 184)

Address for correspondence:

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We note the release of submission number 241 to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into Suicide in Australia, by Mr Roland Browne. This submission makes direct reference to us, and we therefore feel it appropriate to set upon public record our response to Mr Browne's comments.

It appears that Mr Browne may have misunderstood our submission to this Inquiry (submission number 30). In our submission, we address parts (b) and (g) of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry, which concern the accuracy of suicide reporting in Australia, the adequacy of the current program of research into suicide and suicide prevention, and the manner in which findings are disseminated to practitioners and incorporated into government policy

Attachments B to E of our submission document instances where the academic peer review process has been bypassed, where articles have been fast tracked for publication without adequate scrutiny, and where poor quality research has been passed on to government employees involved in the field of health policy. We highlight that these issues undermine the advancement of quality research about suicide and suicide prevention. We also note that these occurrences demonstrate a series of failings of the current academic system in Australia (and internationally), in the field of suicide prevention research.

It appears, however, that Mr Browne has significantly misinterpreted the content of our submission, and as a consequence attempts to discredit our research into firearm suicide. To support his claims, Mr Browne provides a paper by Hemenway, published in the Journal of Public Health Policy, which criticises our research.

We must inform the Committee that this citation provides another example of the troubling publishing bias that we highlight in our original submission. As shown at **Attachment A** of this document, the Journal of Public Health Policy refused to publish our response to the Hemenway article, despite initially inviting that response and subsequently agreeing that the content of our response was fit for publication.

This contrasts starkly with Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) guidelines around "encouraging debate", which state that "cogent criticisms of published work

should be published unless Editors have convincing reasons why they cannot be,” and “authors of criticised material should be given the opportunity to respond.” These guidelines can be accessed at: [http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/New\\_Code.pdf](http://publicationethics.org/files/u2/New_Code.pdf)

This reinforces the position, expressed in our original submission, that:

**We therefore urge the Committee, when delivering its recommendations, to:**

- *Note* the issues raised in this submission;
- *Recognise* the implications of those issues for evidence-based suicide prevention policy in Australia; and
- *Endorse* the need for independent and rigorous peer review of academic work, freedom of research from suppression or censorship, and the importance of using open and transparent policy development processes, in order to promote quality evidence in the field of suicide prevention.

## Attachment A

(Emails are in chronological order)

On 20 Dec 2009, at 05:28, Samara McPhedran wrote:

Hello,

I am resending the email below, first sent on November 21 2009, as I do not yet appear to have received a response to my query.

----

Dear Sir/Madam,

I note with interest the recently published article "How to find nothing" by David Hemenway (JPHP, 30(3): 260-268).

As this article makes extensive – and, regrettably, many factually inaccurate - comments on the Baker and McPhedran paper "Gun Laws and Sudden Death", my co-author and I are curious as to why neither of us was sought as a reviewer of this work.

Can you please clarify why neither of us was approached to peer review this paper?

I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours Sincerely,

Samara McPhedran

From: Journal of Public Health Policy [jphp@umb.edu]

Sent: Sunday, 20 December 2009 7:04 PM

To: chair@ic-wish.org

Subject: Re: Query re peer review process

Dr. McPhedran: For whatever reason, we never received your 21 November e-mail. As to why we did not contact you to review the manuscript, we had trusted reviewers whom we used.

We would welcome a letter to the editor from you about the Hemenway piece.

If you would like to be considered in the future as reviewers for JPHP, please send us some information about yourselves, including the topics about which you believe you would be good reviewers.

Thanks for your interest.

Anthony ROBBINS & Phyllis FREEMAN

Co-Editors

Journal of Public Health Policy

213 West Canton Street  
Boston, MA 02116  
617 536 6903  
www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/  
jphp@umb.edu  
anthony.robbins@tufts.edu  
phyllis.freeman@umb.edu

>>> -----Original Message-----

>>> From: journals@ejpress.com [mailto:journals@ejpress.com]

>>> Sent: Thursday, 14 January 2010 3:13 AM

>>> To: chair@ic-wish.org

>>> Subject: 10003L Unable to Use - Decision Letter

>>>

>>> Why 'finding nothing' matters for good science and policy: a

>>> response to Hemenway (2009)

>>>

>>> Dear Dr. McPhedran,

>>>

>>> We appreciate the opportunity to have reviewed your manuscript at

>>> the

>>> Journal of Public Health Policy. After consideration by the editors,

>>> we

>>> have decided that it does not meet our current editorial needs. We

>>> wish

>>> you success with submission elsewhere.

>>>

>>> On reading your letter, we do not believe it contributes

>>> sufficiently to justify publication in our journal, as space is

>>> short.

>>>

>>> As a global journal with a mission to present insightful, original

>>> papers containing important discussions contributing to public

>>> health

>>> policy we continue to welcome new submissions. If you would like to

>>> submit another manuscript at some point in the future, we would

>>> welcome

>>> that.

>>>

>>>  
>>> Sincerely,  
>>>  
>>> Anthony Robbins, MD, MPA & Phyllis Freeman, JD  
>>> Co-Editors  
>>> JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY  
>>> Editorial Office  
>>> 213 West Canton Street  
>>> Boston, MA 02116  
>>> 617 536 5190  
>>> jphp@umb.edu  
>>> <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/>

>> On 13 Jan 2010, at 21:55, Samara McPhedran wrote:

>>  
>>> Dear Anthony and Phyllis,  
>>>  
>>> Thank you for your prompt response. I am, however, a little  
>>> confused as to why our letter - an invited response to criticism of  
>>> our work -  
>>> is  
>>> not fit for publication.  
>>>  
>>> Can you please clarify your journal's policy on balanced debate and  
>>> 'right of response'?  
>>>  
>>> Thank you in advance,  
>>> Samara McPhedran

>> -----Original Message-----

>> From: Journal of Public Health Policy [mailto:jphp@umb.edu]

>> Sent: Thursday, 14 January 2010 7:58 AM

>> To: chair@ic-wish.org

>> Subject: Re: 10003L Unable to Use - Decision Letter

>>

>> It is surely fit, but with great demand for space, which is limited,

>> it is not of sufficiently high priority. Thanks again. T.

>>

>> Anthony ROBBINS & Phyllis FREEMAN

>> Co-Editors

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>> [www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/)  
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>> [phyllis.freeman@umb.edu](mailto:phyllis.freeman@umb.edu)  
>>

>

> On 14 Jan 2010, at 07:24, Samara McPhedran wrote:

>

>> Perhaps, then, you could advise me of the space that you have  
>> available for letters to the editor (e.g., suggested word count)?

> -----Original Message-----

> From: Journal of Public Health Policy [<mailto:jphp@umb.edu>]

> Sent: Thursday, 14 January 2010 7:54 PM

> To: [chair@ic-wish.org](mailto:chair@ic-wish.org)

> Subject: Re: 10003L Unable to Use - Decision Letter

>

> Look at recent issues and you will see how space has been allocated to  
> letters. T.

>

> Anthony ROBBINS & Phyllis FREEMAN

> Co-Editors

> Journal of Public Health Policy

> 213 West Canton Street

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> [www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/)

> [jphp@umb.edu](mailto:jphp@umb.edu)

> [anthony.robbins@tufts.edu](mailto:anthony.robbins@tufts.edu)

> [phyllis.freeman@umb.edu](mailto:phyllis.freeman@umb.edu)

On 14 Jan 2010, at 10:40, Samara McPhedran wrote:

> I have noted that recent letters (e.g., July 2009) contain between  
> 600-1200 words. Our contribution fell within this range, which is why

> it is unclear how space for letters to the editor is allocated. Can  
> you please clarify this?

From: Journal of Public Health Policy [jphp@umb.edu]  
Sent: Thursday, 14 January 2010 9:01 PM  
To: chair@ic-wish.org  
Subject: Re: 10003L Unable to Use - Decision Letter

We are under no obligation to print letters. The editors decide.  
Thanks. T.

Anthony ROBBINS & Phyllis FREEMAN  
Co-Editors  
Journal of Public Health Policy  
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617 536 6903  
[www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/jphp/)  
jphp@umb.edu  
anthony.robbins@tufts.edu  
phyllis.freeman@umb.edu

From: Samara McPhedran [<mailto:chair@ic-wish.org>]  
Sent: Thursday, 14 January 2010 10:34 PM  
To: 'jphp@umb.edu'  
Subject: RE: 10003L Unable to Use - Decision Letter

Thank you, but I am still seeking clarification on JPHP policy concerning the publication of balancing views and right of response, plus would appreciate information about what is considered to be an appropriate length for letters to the editor.

Can you please provide details of your policy and standard guidelines in the above areas?

It would be most helpful for my co-author and I to be aware of JPHPs position on these specific issues.

I look forward to your response.

(No response was received)