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## The impact of media coverage of the suicide of a well-known Quebec reporter: the case of Gaëtan Girouard

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### Abstract

Evidence of a media impact on suicide is mixed and needs further research. The main objective of this article is to document the effects of the media coverage following the suicide of a well-known and popular television reporter in Quebec, Canada. A content analysis of the printed media and an analysis of suicide rates during the following year, of coroners' records and of calls to Suicide Prevention Centres during the following 3 months was conducted. Most guidelines for responsible reporting of a suicide were not applied. The results showed a rise in the suicides rates immediately after the reporter's suicide, especially by hanging as in the original case. A cluster of six suicides by hanging also took place in the small municipality where the reporter's suicide occurred. There was also an indication of direct influence in the coroners' records and a rise in calls to Suicide Prevention Centres. This research indicates that the reporting of the suicide of a popular figure preceded an important rise in the number of suicides. A possible theoretical explanation is that a positive role model appeared to suddenly fail to cope with life, thus creating high distress and cognitive dissonance in the audience. The news media should apply more caution and follow recommended guidelines in reporting this type of news.

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### Introduction

There have been several extensive reviews of the effects of media reports on suicide (Phillips, 1974; Phillips, Leysna, & Paight, 1992; Stack, 2000a, b; Pirkis & Blood, 2001). They cover a wide range of situations: the suicide of well-known figures (mainly political and artistic), spectacular, unusual, or specific forms of

suicide (subway, falls from bridges, romantic sites), murder-suicide, report of a new means (e.g. attacking a policeman in order to be killed by him), and daily reports of ordinary suicides.

The best documented studies of the effects of the suicide of a well-known figure involve popular artists. The suicide of Yokiko Okaoa in Japan in 1986 is thought to have led to an excess of 30 suicides during the 2 weeks following his death, most of them among teenagers for whom a 44% increase in suicide deaths was observed (Takahashi, 1998). In Hungary, the suicide of a 17 year-old Miss Hungary by an overdose of Lidocain, a medication for heart disease, was widely reported by the

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national press and was the theme of a multi-edition book, a film and a song (Fekete & Macsai, 1990). During the following 6-months, the number of suicides using Lidocain rose from 3 to 25, with peaks after the release of the film and of each new edition of the book. Data available from 13 of the 25 cases showed that 11 had read the book immediately before their death. In Switzerland, the suicide of the internationally known movie star Maria Schell in the spring of 1991 led to eight articles in four local newspapers, some hailing it as an heroic act (Frey, Michel, & Valach, 1996). The suicide rate during the following 3 weeks was the highest for any 3-week period during the previous 4 years, and this was an increase of 43% (18 more deaths) compared to the 3-week period preceding her death. In the United States, Phillips (1974) estimated that the suicide of Marilyn Monroe led to 197 extra suicides. Motto (1967) suggested that the increase was approximately 40% in Los Angeles during the month following her death, mainly among men, and he suggested that a reaction to the loss rather than an imitation effect had been instrumental. More recently, the suicide of Kurt Cobain did not produce an increase in suicide, presumably because the media had described his death in more negative terms and had mentioned that three of his uncles had also died by suicide (Berman, Jobes, & O'Carroll, 1998). There were however five well documented imitation cases and a rise in calls to crisis lines during the following 5 weeks (Jobes, Berman, O'Carroll, Eastgard, & Knickmeyer, 1996). On the other hand, accidental deaths of famous persons such as Princess Diana can have an effect on suicides and suicide attempts (Hawton et al., 2000).

Theories and explanations of a "contagion effect", independent of the nature of the source model, have been proposed to account for the increases in suicides following media reports. The differential identification theory (Stack, 1987; Phillips et al., 1992) suggests that both a vertical (higher status) and a horizontal (similar status) identification are active, integrating both the extraordinary and the ordinary characteristics of the public suicide who is also seen as a hero. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1971) proposes that social facilitation from exposure to media reports and disinhibition mechanisms which make suicidal tendencies possible are both active. The effect should be higher if the report is repeated and, according to this theory, there will be greater effect if the report suggests positive rewards from committing suicide. The behavioural contagion theory (Wheeler, 1966) postulates that higher status models are more influential because they are more likely to be rewarded and less likely to be punished for their action. Finally, the priming effect or activation hypothesis (Berkowitz, 1984) suggests that suicide reports switch on an already pre-programmed set. Thus, the representation of a scenario by a media can trigger an imitation

behaviour in the observer. This theory is more useful in explaining short-term media effects because the emotional impact of the message is likely to diminish with time.

## Method

The population of the province of Quebec is approximately eight millions, 80% of whom are French-speaking. A majority reads local French newspapers and watches the four local French television channels.<sup>1</sup>

### *Press coverage*

The newspapers include 10 dailies, four from Montreal, four from the rest of Quebec and two from Ontario. Three weekly photo magazines also published a full issue on Gaëtan Girouard but they were not analyzed since they did not include individual articles. The period covered was from January 15, 1999, to the end of 1999. The unusual length of the period is due to the publication of new articles later during the year when the coroner's report was made public. The analysis of the press coverage was based upon the criteria proposed by the American Association of Suicidology (2004). These recommendations ask for journalists not to use the word suicide in a headline, not to romanticize suicide, not to mention the method and the site, not to present the suicide as an inexplicable act of a high-achieving person and avoiding descriptions and pictures of grieving relatives. The Quebec Association for Suicide Prevention collected the media material and made it available to us.

### *Coroners reports*

Prior to 1991, the Office of the Coroner-in-chief of the province of Quebec had taken steps to improve the quality of suicide records. Anticipating the impact of Girouard's suicide, coroners were asked to pay special attention to clues that persons deceased by suicide could have been influenced by his death. All the records of suicide deaths investigated by the Coroner's office were analyzed from January 15th to February 6, 1999, the date after which only minimal reference was made to Girouard, based up on our examination of a sample of 37 records after this period.

<sup>1</sup>The reach of the three main Montreal French newspapers is 82% in the French population 18 years and over according to the Newspapers Audience Databank Inc. (<http://www.nad-bank.com>). The market share of the four French television channels in the French population of Quebec is 69% according to the BBM Bureau of Measurement of Canada (<http://www.bbm.ca>).

### Calls to suicide prevention centres (SPC)

Calls to five SPC's were compared for the first 3 months of 1998 and 1999. These centres were Montreal, Quebec, Chicoutimi, Baie-Comeau and Rimouski. The data from two additional centres were excluded because of an historical event: an ice storm in the winter of 1998 had biased their statistics, and data from another centre were excluded because they were not complete. Statistics from Montreal were available on a day-by-day basis and calls from suicidal individuals and family and friends could be identified at this centre.

### Results

#### Press coverage

There were 98 articles in the printed media relating to Girouard's suicide. Of those, 30 were published in the first 2 days after his death and 35 others before the end of the first week. Twenty more articles appeared in the next 3 weeks. Roughly one half of the articles had a strong emotional overtone, describing the reactions of the family, friends, colleagues, other journalists, and lay readers. Moreover, 26 articles were accompanied by

pictures of close family and friends expressing their sadness. The means used were described in 14 articles. Eleven articles referred to a single hypothesis to explain the suicide. Most referred to professional pressure. More than 45 articles underlined Girouard's positive attributes and these included 15 reports or testimonials which viewed Girouard's suicide as acceptable. Most articles referred to this suicide as being unexpected and little information was available on Girouard's psychological problems and vulnerability. Despite these elements which were contrary to guidelines on the coverage of a public suicide, the press did make an effort to increase the awareness of its readership about the facts of suicide. More than 32 articles provided information on suicide and 12 included comments from experts.

#### Impact on suicide rates

Table 1 presents the suicide rates of the general population and of men age 20–49 for the years 1998 and 1999 and the standardized rates comparison tests (Dudewitz & Mishra, 1988). This male age-group was analyzed apart because of a higher probability of identifying with Girouard who was 33 years-old. Most 1999 monthly rates were significantly higher than the 1998 corresponding months including the 4 months

Table 1  
Number (top line) and rate per 100,000 (bottom line) of suicide by month and by year, general population and men aged 20 to 49

Month	Total Quebec population				Men from 20 to 49 years-old			
	1998	1999	Z	p <	1998	1999	Z	p <
January	105 17.21	120 19.60	3.38	.001	70 24.78	77 27.33	2.06	.05
February	103 16.88	140 22.87	8.11	.0001	69 24.42	94 33.37	6.82	.0001
March	120 19.66	142 23.20	4.62	.0001	88 31.15	102 36.20	3.59	.0005
April	126 20.65	139 22.71	2.68	.01	74 26.19	86 30.53	3.35	.001
May	136 22.29	154 25.16	3.57	.001	82 29.02	96 34.08	3.70	.001
June	124 20.32	128 20.91	0.79	n.s.	78 27.61	86 30.53	2.23	.05
July	117 19.17	138 22.54	4.47	.0001	78 27.21	96 34.08	4.79	.0001
August	113 18.52	127 20.75	3.05	.005	72 25.48	83 29.46	3.12	.005
September	116 19.01	126 20.58	2.15	.05	74 26.19	83 29.46	2.55	.01
October	101 16.55	121 19.77	4.57	.0001	56 19.82	73 25.91	5.23	.0001
November	117 19.17	127 20.75	2.14	.05	69 24.42	90 31.95	5.8	.0001
December	92 15.08	103 16.83	2.65	.01	53 18.76	64 22.72	3.57	.001

following January 14, 1999. This was true for the Quebec population and for men age 20–49. Of the 120 deaths in January 1999, 68 (57%) took place in the second half and 52 (43%) in the first half of the month. The month-long period following January 14, 1999, that is from January 15 to February 14, included 155 suicides, the maximum of any single month period for the 3 years 1997–1999. By contrast, January had the lowest monthly average in 1997 and 1998.

Table 2 shows that the proportion of suicides by hanging rose by 18% from 1998 to 1999 and the proportion of suicides by other means rose by 7% over the same period. The percentage of suicides by hanging increased by 3% overall. It is worth noting that during the 2-month period following January 14, five suicides by hanging used a belt, a highly unusual method which was used by Girouard.

### Clustering

Since monthly rates by region were relatively low and the observed rise spread over a wide geographical area, it was not possible to identify any region with a proportionally higher increase, including Quebec city and Granby, where the Girouard family homes were located. However, the Greater Metropolitan Quebec list showed an unusual number of suicides by hanging in the municipality of Ste-Foy, where Girouard was found dead. Six suicides by hanging took place during the 38-day period following January 14, 1999, for a total of 7 including Girouard. Altogether, during the 3 years of 1997, 1998 and 1999, only 19 deaths by hanging took place during the 1057 days excluding this 38-day period following January 14. The ratio is almost ten times greater during this 38-day period. The use of the scan statistic for detecting clustering in time produced a significant result at  $p < .01$  (Wallenstein, 1980). We used 2 months for the cluster period which included seven suicides and 36 months for the reference period which included 26 suicides.

The six deaths by hanging in Ste-Foy included four men and two women, age 16–41 years. The dates were January 16 and 24, and February 2, 6, 9 and 21. In two of these cases, the deceased had been described as

distressed by Girouard's death in the coroner's report. All six cases showed some of the usual risk factors for suicide: mental health problems, recent loss and an history of suicide attempts.

### Coroners' reports

An analysis of all 79 coroners' records between January 15 to February 6, found that 10 reports (13%) indicated that Girouard's suicide could have had at least some influence (Table 3). Of 37 files analyzed after that date, only 2 (5%) had a minimal indication of some influence. In five additional cases, there was a reference to the event without any clear evidence of influence. All ten cases (seven men and three women) were associated with some risk factors of suicide (marital separation, financial problems, psychiatric diagnosis). The average age was 31 with a standard deviation of 13 years. Four of these 10 cases were from the Quebec City area and only one from Montreal. Nine of the 10 cases died by hanging.

### Calls to SPC's

There was an increase of 46% in calls to SPC's in January 1999 compared to January 1998 for the aggregate data of the five centres (Table 4). The increase was 15% for February and March 1999. Nearly half of the calls in this sample originated from the Montreal area. The day-by-day statistics in Montreal showed that the number of calls rose by almost 200% on the 4 days following January 14, and the SPC administration was pressed to add volunteers. The difference between January 1999 and January 1998 was mainly accounted for by the second half of the month. Another important observation is that third party calls (from friends and relatives of suicidal persons) increased proportionally more than calls from suicidal individuals in the Montreal area. Third party calls usually involve more serious cases where the suicidal person is less likely to call or is perceived as being in a state of danger by the family.

## Discussion

### The impact on suicides

There was a significant rise in provincial suicide rates during the 4 weeks following Girouard's suicide and up to the end of year 1999. The higher rate throughout 1999 may not be entirely attributed to Girouard's death nor to its media coverage since the news coverage receded after 1 month. During the year 2000, the rate decreased and returned back to the level of the year 1998. The 1999 increase was associated with suicide by hanging, suggesting a modeling effect. These data suggest that a large part of the excess of 50 suicides in the 1 month

Table 2  
Suicides in Quebec by hanging and other means, for 1998 and 1999, number and percentage

Year	Hanging	Other means	Total
1998	621 (45.3%)	749 (54.7%)	1370
1999	758 (48.4%)	807 (51.7%)	1565

Table 3  
Description of coroners' reports showing an influence from Girouard's suicide

Sex	Age	Date	Description
F	40	16.1	Had been watching non-stop all TV reports on Girouard's suicide and took her life 2 days after. Had made recent suicide attempts.
M	16	18.1	Left a long letter. Quote: "But I think about Girouard: I prefer to stop everything now rather than start a life, have a spouse, kids, and leave them on the way. His gesture is not more serious than mine, this is sure".
M	26	19.1	Left a will dated January 14th. An issue of the "Journal de Québec" reporting Girouard's suicide on the front page, was found on the site of the suicide.
F	15	25.1	On January 17th, told her friends when talking about Girouard's death that she would end up like him. Said to another friend: "I will do like Girouard, I will hook (hang) myself".
M	29	25.1	Had brought the issue of the <i>Sept Jours</i> magazine on Girouard's suicide in the garage where he hanged himself and had made a collage with the pictures. Said that he would do like him if he ever committed suicide. His girlfriend's brother also committed suicide a few days after.
M	29	29.1	An issue of the <i>Sept Jours</i> magazine showing a photo report of Girouard was lying nearby the site of hanging.
F	54	30.1	Had listened with keen interest to the programs on Girouard's death. Mentioned that if he, who had two young girls could do it, she could also do the same.
M	19	31.1	Learning about Girouard's death, he said: "Mister Girouard should have been desperate like me". The man was described to have been highly distressed by the reports.
M	47	2.2	Had told his family in the hours before his suicide that he would imitate Girouard's gesture. Said that he had read everything about Girouard, that he was well prepared, and that everything was set up in his shed.
M	18	6.2	Very distressed by Girouard's suicide; said he did not have the strength to live on in this techno world.

period following January 14 can be related to Girouard's suicide and its media coverage. However, there is no way to ascertain how many suicides during the 10 months after February 15 were influenced by his death. Maybe none, if we apply strict rules of proof. However, it is possible that there were additional suicides associated with his death throughout the year.

The discovery of a cluster of six suicides in the 38 days following January 14 in the municipality of Ste-Foy may provide more direct evidence of a media effect. This cluster of seven including Girouard is difficult to explain at first glance because Girouard was only a temporary resident of Ste-Foy. Furthermore, Ste-Foy is a heterogeneous neighbourhood with a mixture of upper- and lower-middle class, suburban-style bungalows, middle priced apartment buildings and duplexes. Ste-Foy had a population of 72,330 in 1996, an average family income of \$63,000 CDN compared to \$53,000 CDN for the province and twice as many people over 25 with a university level education than the provincial average. This may seem an unlikely place for a suicide cluster to occur given the association between suicide and lower income. The six suicides were scattered throughout the community. They had little similarity to Girouard with regard to age and profession and there were no nearby addresses. The cluster may simply be related to the impact of the publication of the name of the municipality repeatedly in the printed media (10 times) and in the television coverage.

Based upon the coroners' investigations, there is evidence that at least some of the suicides were impacted by Girouard's suicide and the media coverage. We found 10 cases where the family indicated that the suicidal person had been upset or influenced to a great degree by the news of Girouard's suicide. It is important to note that all coroners did not thoroughly investigate the presence of a possible influence. In some cases, the evidence is clearer: a woman watched her television set almost non-stop 2 days after his death and then took her life. A man left a collage with photos of Girouard from a special issue of a magazine at the site of his suicide. At least four others specifically mentioned that they were imitating Girouard. A woman stated that she was stirred by his courage. This material does not allow us to conclude that these persons would not have committed suicide during that same period or later in the absence of Girouard's suicide. They all appear to have had mental health troubles or problems with alcohol or drugs, some had made previous attempts, and some had recently experienced the break-up of a relationship. Still the evidence indicates that the reports of Girouard's death had produced a high level of distress in these highly vulnerable persons before their suicide.

#### *The impact on the prevention services*

Finally, there was a significant increase in the calls to Suicide Prevention Centres. There was a dramatic

Table 4  
Number of calls to suicide prevention centres, comparison of first three months of 1998 and 1999

	1998	1999	1999 minus 1998
<b>Montréal First party</b>			
January	1141	1561	36.8
February	1357	1313	-3.2
March	1405	1481	5.4
<b>Montreal Third party</b>			
January	537	909	69.3
February	767	934	21.8
March	299	810	171.1
<b>Quebec</b>			
January	698	982	40.1
February	742	946	27.5
March	821	943	14.9
<b>Rimouski</b>			
January	499	593	18.8
February	539	476	-11.7
March	611	500	-18.2
<b>Chicoutimi</b>			
January	279	496	77.7
February	326	394	20.9
March	382	383	0.3
<b>Baie-Comeau</b>			
January	84	196	133.3
February	106	202	90.6
March	90	190	111.1
<b>Total</b>			
January	3238	4737	46.3
February	3837	4265	11.2
March	3608	4307	19.4

increase of roughly 100% in the last half of January, and a significant increase of 15% through the end of March. As was the case for suicide rates, there was a slight downward shift in February. The increase in calls was not evenly distributed over the province and some centres even reported a decline after January as compared to 1998.

The most interesting data came from Montreal, which accounted for more than two thirds of all calls. Montreal kept the most detailed records on a daily basis. The day-by-day statistics indicated an immediate and sharp increase in calls beginning January 15, with the number of calls more than tripling during the first 4 days. Some staff members said they felt that Girouard's impact had been much stronger and of longer duration than these statistics indicate. Either their perceptions were biased or their impressions were based on elements other than those covered by this survey. First party calls, that is calls made by suicidal persons, showed only a

moderate increase in January and none at all after that month. By contrast, third party calls from family and friends showed a comparatively larger increase in January, a more modest increase in February, and a rather sharp increase of 171% in March. The staff at Suicide Action Montreal felt that third party calls usually include more cases where the suicidal danger is higher than first party calls, since the suicidal person may have been unable to seek help by him or herself. These calls usually require more attention from volunteers and may last longer, possibly explaining the perception by staff of greater impact. There is also the possibility of a sleeper effect in more vulnerable persons. In this scenario, there would be an upset produced by the media, but the full impact would not be felt until there was a triggering factor in the person's life. Since January is usually a low suicide rate month and March a high rate month, more of these triggering events may be present in March. It is also possible that the publication of SPC phone numbers in the newspapers could account for the rise in calls. However, this is unlikely since the rise in calls started just before the publication of their phone numbers and lasted long after their publication. Furthermore, if this was the case, the publication of the SPC phone numbers should have had a similar impact on first party and third party callers.

#### *Tentative explanations*

The material we examined also provides some clues concerning the psychological processes involved in contagion. Our data suggest that the hypothesis of a simple imitation effect may need to be revised in favour of a more complex model. Suicides from all ages and both sexes were distressed by the news. In general, the media did not provide any information which would allow people to identify with Girouard's real problems. His personal problems were only reported 9 months after his death and, immediately after the day of his suicide, he had been depicted as having a relatively trouble free life except for the usual court cases related to his television program. There was possibly a primer effect from the media coverage since the coroner's reports indicated that some of those who committed suicide afterwards were already in a high state of vulnerability on January 14 and may have just needed a little incentive to complete their suicide. The fact that the rise in suicides lasted nearly a year, and the increase in calls to SPC's lasted more than 2 months supports the possibility of a sleeper effect, especially if one considers the fact that the information about Girouard's suicide was repeated in the media during many weeks after January 14. The anxiety produced by the news could have lasted many weeks and this repeated exposure may have later resulted in a decreased capacity to face future stressful life events.

Both the differential identification hypothesis and the behavioural contagion theory predict that the model who died by suicide should not be too different from those who imitate his behaviour. This appears to be the case with Girouard. He was popular and competent, but still young at 33. He was depicted as being very much like ordinary people in having a family, but also ideal in helping to fight criminal abuse and in volunteering to prevent suicide. The behavioural contagion theory also mentions that famous suicides are more likely to be influential because they are more likely to be rewarded in the coverage of their deaths. This was certainly true in this case given the volume of articles, 98, published over a long time span and the numerous testimonials and glorifications of Girouard. More than 45 articles depicted Girouard with positive traits such as being a model, a man who never made an error, a perfectionist, a winner, a hard-worker, and a super-journalist. Fifteen reports or testimonials regarded Girouard's suicide as acceptable. Forty-eight hours after his death, a report quoted his father with the following words: "Tuesday night, I felt some weakness (in him)...I respect his choice. To come to this point, he must have suffered a lot" (La Presse, January 16, p. A3).

Contrary to movie stars or pop music artists who are not generally perceived as a paragon of mental health or models of a good life, Girouard was presented in the media as being in control, energetic, happy, and with high moral standards both because of his work ethic and his dedication in bringing justice to the poor and to preventing suicide. Consequently, the failure of a hero who apparently had the resources to be happy and to cope with life problems may have been perceived as an unbearable experience for highly vulnerable persons. This contradictory information on his image is likely to have produced a strong dissonance in the population despite the denial of the negative aspect by the media who tried to maintain his image as a hero. The underscoring of Girouard's achievements after his suicide may have led more people to feel helpless and desperate afterwards.

It is also important to note that Girouard's story produced distress not only in the most vulnerable persons but in the average citizen as well. It reached such a point that the Quebec coroner-in-chief issued a letter to the news media requesting them to stop the press coverage on Girouard because he was concerned by its negative impact. We can hypothesize that this suicide may also have weakened the social support available from members of the support systems of the most vulnerable because these people were also distressed by the news. This effect may have been exacerbated by daily exposure to photos of his parents, colleagues, and supervisors expressing sadness, shock and even panic. These television colleagues who had appeared on the same programs as Girouard were also

faces that people were used to seeing with a constant smile and enthusiasm on a daily basis and this unaccustomed distress expressed by other media figures may have added to a sense of helplessness.

### **Clinical implications**

The impact of this public suicide should make clinicians more conscious of their patients' vulnerability to collective drama and encourage them to discuss these issues, especially with patients who made a previous attempt or show significant distress. There is a need also for health professions to work with the press in order to develop means of decreasing the psychological impact of news, which may contribute to a feeling of helplessness in a large part of the readership.

### **Limitations**

Despite the definitive impact of this suicide, it is not possible to accurately assess the number of suicides caused by the mediatization of Girouard's death, and especially the increase observed many months after January 14. Furthermore, our conclusions and interpretations may only apply to coverage of suicides by public figures who have characteristics with which the audience can identify. Finally, the main impact on calls to SPC is limited to the first 2 weeks after the death, with subsequent weeks seeing only increased requests from family and friends of suicidal persons.

### **Conclusions**

We cannot determine how much of the increase of 195 suicides in 1999 over 1998 may be attributed with Girouard's death and its coverage by the media. However, there is good reason to believe that the news of his death was instrumental in at least 50 of the suicides in the 4-week period immediately following January 14. Although we will never know the exact number, we feel that a part of the responsibility for the increased mortality is to be shared by the media, both written and television, despite the fact that a few editorials warned about this danger.

Guidelines had been provided to the media by Suicide-Action-Montreal but they were rarely heeded when this event occurred. These recommendations repeated those of the American Association of Suicidology and invited media to provide information about prevention and help centres. The unsettling character of the news on the first day is at least partially understandable, but not the emotional treatment of the event during the following 2 weeks and later. If journalists

have the right and obligation to transmit news worth being reported, and Girouard's suicide was undoubtedly an important event, they should abstain from expressing their personal emotions on the public stage and should examine their responsibility to weigh the consequences of their reports on the most vulnerable members of our society. In this case, this was a matter of life and death.

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