

## Professor Keith Hawton

Professor of Psychiatry  
Director of the Centre for Suicide Research  
Oxford University, UK



For 35 years, Dr. Hawton and his research group have been conducting investigations concerning the epidemiology, causes, treatment, prevention and outcome of suicidal behaviour. Current major interests include restriction of access to means for suicide, effectiveness of treatments and services for self-harm patients, self-harm in adolescents, suicide and the media, and suicide in prisons. He has published more than 400 papers and chapters and 15 books, including *The International Handbook of Suicide and Attempted Suicide* (2000), *Prevention and Treatment of Suicidal Behaviour: From Science to Practice* (2005), and *By Their Own Young Hand: Deliberate Self Harm and Suicidal Ideas in Adolescents* (2006). He has received the following awards: Stengel Research Award from the International Association for Suicide Prevention (1995); Dublin Career Research Award from the American Association of Suicidology (2000); Research Award of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (2002).

### **Suicidal behaviour in adolescents and youth: developmental, cross-cultural and prevention perspectives**

Adolescence is the phase of life when self-harm and suicide become increasingly common. Suicide rates in adolescents vary greatly between countries and over time. While much attention has previously been paid to suicide rates in Western countries, there is increasing evidence that suicide may be more common than previously thought in adolescents in Asian and other countries. Accuracy of suicide statistics is a particular problem in young people, with coroners and other agencies frequently assigning non-suicide causes of death where suicide is the likely cause. This is likely partly to reflect a wish to protect families from suicide verdicts but may also reflect personal attitudes regarding suicide in young people. This is likely to undermine appropriate attention being paid to youth suicide. While suicide is far more common in male than female adolescents, this pattern may be reversed in some Asian settings.

Non-fatal self-harm appears to increase in frequency from age 12 onwards, especially in girls. Thus the female: male gender ratio in rates of self-harm may be as high as 6-fold in 12-14 year-olds, but then decreases steadily in older adolescents to around 2:1 as rates in males increase and those in females level off. The emergence of self-harm in young adolescence, particularly in females, has been shown to be related to pubertal stage, especially late puberty, and to the concurrent emergency of mood disorders, alcohol use and onset of sexual activity. Findings from The Child and Adolescent Self-harm in Europe (CASE) study have shown differences in prevalence of self-harm and suicidal ideation between countries. Dysfunctional families, child abuse and behavioural disorders are other important pre-cursors, with self-harm episodes generally following relationship problems, both with families and peers and with boyfriends/girlfriends./ The role of mood and other psychiatric disorders in adolescent self-harm is often underestimated.

The majority of self-harm episodes that occur in adolescents in the community do not result in presentation to hospital or other clinical services, so that much self-harm remains covert. There is increasing evidence for social influences on self-harm and suicide in adolescents, with 'contagion' by exposure directly to self-harm by others and indirectly through the media being important. It is also apparent that the internet may play a role, with pro-suicide/self-harm sites being a particular issue.

Prevention of self-harm and suicide in children and adolescents presents major challenges. Potential initiatives include: school educational programmes, screening for at-risk individuals, provision of emergency help lines, improving services for self-harm patients, specific aftercare treatments following self-harm, restriction of access to means for self-harm and suicide, initiatives to restrict potential negative influences of some internet sites and promote helpful sites, optimising detection and treatment of individuals with psychiatric disorders, and novel treatments for individuals with emerging personality difficulties and repetitive self-harm.