

The Boston Globe

SATURDAY, MAY 16, 1998

Publisher's suicide note puts blame on health care system

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In a desperate suicide note that blamed the health care system for forsaking him, the publisher of the Taunton Daily Gazette described his attempts to call a referral line and find a mental health professional covered by his insurance - all to no avail.

■ **Managed care policies often prevent proper treatment of depression, specialists say. A3.**

While the details of his attempts to get help may never be known, J. Timothy Hogan's suicide this week highlights what some health care professionals see as weaknesses in this nation's insurance coverage for depression and other mental illness.

And while the 36-year-old publisher's suicide note did not specify which referral lines he called, two statewide professional organizations have recently suspended such lines - and Hogan may have tried to call one of them.

"I have this tremendous depression," Hogan hand-wrote in a four-page letter that was addressed to his half-sister and excerpted in yesterday's Gazette, where he had recently been named publisher. "So why not get help? I tried and tried and tried. The health system completely failed me."

Hogan, who was found dead of apparent carbon-monoxide poisoning two days ago in his truck on the wooded grounds of a state school in Taunton, apparently did not name the insurance company, the referral line, the hospital, or any of the other places where he turned for help, according to the published excerpts of the

suicide note.

But based on the description in the note, some health care providers thought Hogan must have been covered through a managed care company with a complicated referral policy and a limited list of acceptable mental health providers.

Attempts to confirm the insurer through the Gazette's owner, the Journal Register Co. of Trenton, N.J., were unsuccessful. Diane Pardee, vice president of corporate communications for the parent company, would not name the insurer. She cited confidentiality and the variety of health plans offered to employees.

But a Gazette employee said United HealthCare of New England, a managed care company, provides insurance coverage for the paper. A United HealthCare spokeswoman refused to say whether that is true, citing confidentiality and company policy.

"I just feel like this is an example of a tragedy, where this person was actively trying to get help, help that was probably available and was just tricky to get a hold of," said David Jobs, a clinical psychologist and president of the American Association of Suicidology, a Washington-based organization that studies suicide and its prevention.

"We've got to find ways to modify our health care delivery system and our social support systems, because they make a difference," said Jobs. He did not know the details of the case but spoke generally, based on what has been reported in news accounts.

Paul K. Ling, a Quincy psychologist who is one of the leaders of the Consortium for Psychotherapy, a statewide group, said, "If you're depressed and desperate, services are increasingly difficult to access."

Ling cited the case of a person who this month committed suicide and put the blame on managed care - a reportedly HIV-positive California man who killed himself on live television.

Soon after he moved to Massachusetts earlier this year, Hogan wrote in the note, he tried to get a referral from a mental health provider in Pennsylvania without success. Rather than picking a name out of the phone book, Hogan wrote, "I called the Massachusetts psychiatric referral line. It was not in service due to staff turnover."

While Hogan did not name the organization running the referral line, both the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society and the Massachusetts Psychological Association acknowledge that they have recently suspended their special referral lines.

Hogan might very well have called the referral line of the psychological association, based on what he described in his suicide note, and what the group's executive director describes.

"As a public service, the Massachusetts Psychological Association offered a non-emergency referral service," said psychologist Elena Eisman, the executive director. "Because of a staff turnover, we have not been able to offer this service for the past couple of weeks."

She said, though, that the agency plans to restaff as soon as possible.

While Eisman said she had no way to confirm that Hogan tried calling her organization's line, she said the taped message specifically cited staff turnover as the reason for the suspension, and referred callers in crisis to their local hospital emergency rooms.

"At this point, our thoughts and our hearts are with Mr. Hogan's family and his friends," she said.

Hogan probably did not try calling the psychiatric society, since he moved to Massachusetts in February, and the society's special toll-free referral line was disconnected in January. However, people who call the society's regular business office weekdays can still get names of three psychiatrists, said Dorothy Mooney, executive director of the 1,800-member group.

"We're not a suicide prevention service," said Mooney.

The society decided to discontinue the referral service when it became increasingly complicated to keep track of which members take what insurance, and when the number of psychiatrists participating dropped from about 700 down to 200 after a \$25 listing fee was instituted, she said.

When Hogan tried calling a hospital, according to his note, he got voice mail. "I made an appointment with a general physician and tried to get a referral from him. His office tried to set me up with an affiliated doctor. However, their mental health doctors did not take my insurance."

In the end, Hogan wrote, "My only hope is that my death will awaken the health care community and that lives will be saved in the future."

"So that is my story. I know I am sick. I tried to get help. No one would help me."