

Erecting Barriers to Suicide by Removing Barriers to Science

To the Editor: As the only Antipodean in an online working group, the lead author (G.S.M.) awoke to a flurry of emails reacting to a bulletin from the National Science Foundation (NSF).¹ The communication, sent to researchers and research organisations, warned that the use of certain terms, such as “barrier,” in grant proposals and publications made possible with government funding, would flag them for further scrutiny.^{1,2} G.S.M. emailed the group with a tongue-in-cheek interjection stating that they could “rest assured that [he] had taken immediate action, in light of this well-thought out directive and fired off an email to the Australian World Heritage Preservation Society* [and that] they had agreed that the Great Barrier Reef will now simply be called the Great Reef! [He added, however,] that this had raised some eyebrows, as it sounds like a big joint, waiting to be smoked but that either way tourism is likely to be unaffected.”

G.S.M.’s playful comments reflected the collective helplessness with which these developments were being perceived by academics worldwide—especially in Australia, where in recent days and weeks, similar notifications along with a questionnaire³ had been sent to universities and recipients of US research funding to provide justification of their research and demonstrate its alignment with US government interests.⁴ The seriousness of this and the swiftness with which these changes have come about are evidenced by the withdrawal of funding from the Australian National University, one of Australia’s premiere research establishments.⁵

In psychiatry, one of the biggest challenges is to prevent suicide, an act that also occurs outside of the context of mental illness but is especially common in the context of psychiatric disorders, such as depression.⁶ The impact of suicide and importance of

preventing it cannot be overstated, with approximately 1 suicide occurring every 11 minutes in the US alone.⁷ And while the suicide rate is roughly 4 times greater in males as compared to females,⁷ women and girls are twice as likely as men and boys to experience depression.⁸

The prevalence of depression and suicide and their permeation of society has prompted prevention efforts such as the introduction of the US bill “Barriers to Suicide Act of 2023,” which tried to install deterrents such as suicide prevention nets and barriers at so-called suicide “hotspots,” eg, bridges.⁹ Even so, despite such measures, the rates of suicide in most countries around the world have continued to increase, amplifying further the need for research. However, it is difficult to see how research can find the causes of depression and suicide and how effective interventions can be developed if key terms that inform our understanding are banned. For example, “female,” “mental health,” “sociocultural” and “socioeconomic,” and “trauma” that are particularly pertinent to depression, as well as “vulnerable populations” that comprise “minorities” that are often “marginalized” and are thus prone to suicide risk, are among the words being limited from use or removed altogether.² Without these specifiers that characterize the populations of interest and delineate the subsets within these that are at risk, it is difficult to envisage meaningful findings emerging from research that is conducted without consideration of critical sociodemographic and clinical factors.

Hence why, if we are to advance science and overcome psychiatric and social issues such as depression and suicide—that affect the whole of society—then perhaps we ourselves as custodians of scientific integrity must form a “great barrier” and prevent these changes from occurring.

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Gin S. Malhi, MBChB, BSc (Hons), MSt, MD
Kinga Szymaniak, PsyM, PhD
Gurubhaskar Shivakumar, MBBS, MP
Erica Bell, BSc

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*The Australian World Heritage Preservation Society is a fictitious institution.

Article Information

Published Online: April 30, 2025.
<https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.25i15883>

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J Clin Psychiatry 2025;86(2):25i15883

To Cite: Malhi GS, Szymaniak K, Shivakumar G, et al. Erecting barriers to suicide by removing barriers to science. *J Clin Psychiatry* 2025;86(2):25i15883.

Author Affiliations: Academic Department of Psychiatry, Kolling Institute, Northern Clinical School, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia (Malhi, Szymaniak, Shivakumar, Bell); CADE Clinic and Mood-T, Royal North Shore Hospital, Northern Sydney Local Health District, St Leonards, New South Wales, Australia (Malhi, Szymaniak, Shivakumar, Bell); Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom (Malhi); Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, Faculty of Philosophy, University

of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom (Malhi); Adult Mental Health Unit, Hornsby Ku-Ring-Gai Hospital, Northern Sydney Local Health District, Hornsby, New South Wales, Australia (Shivakumar).

Corresponding Author: Gin S. Malhi, Academic Department of Psychiatry, Northern Clinical School, The University of Sydney, Royal North Shore Hospital, Reserve Rd, St Leonards, Sydney, NSW 2065, Australia (gin.malhi@sydney.edu.au).

Relevant Financial Relationships: Dr Malhi has received grant or research support from National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Rotary Health, NSW Health, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Ramsay Research and Teaching Fund, Elsevier, AstraZeneca, Janssen-Cilag, Lundbeck, Otsuka and Servier and has been a consultant for AstraZeneca, Janssen-Cilag, Lundbeck, Otsuka and Servier. He is the recipient of an investigator-initiated grant from Janssen-Cilag (PoET Study), joint grant funding from the University of Sydney and National Taiwan University (Ignition Grant)

and grant funding from The North Foundation. Dr Bell has received joint grant funding from the University of Sydney and National Taiwan University (Ignition Grant) and grant funding from The North Foundation. Drs Szymaniak and Shivakumar have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding/Support: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this letter. None of the authors received any funding from the US government.

Disclaimer: Please note the views expressed in this letter are solely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of any of the organizations the authors are affiliated with.

ORCID: Gin S. Malhi: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4524-9091>; Kinga Szymaniak: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5887-9028>; Gurubhaskar Shivakumar: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7449-5490>; Erica Bell: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8483-8497>