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## Youth suicides soaring

### Deaths of two cousins among 25 last year

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By Kevin Rollason and Leah Janzen

THE chief medical examiner's office is investigating the suicides of two teenage cousins who killed themselves under the same roof within days of each other last fall.

Dr. Thambirajah Balachandra said the deaths were two of the 25 suicides committed by youth under the age of 18 in 2005 -- the highest number of Manitoba children killing themselves since at least 2000.

A 13-year-old girl, who hanged herself in the basement of her home on Oct. 24, was rushed to the Children's Hospital where she was pronounced dead.

A few days later, on Nov. 6, the girl's 16-year-old cousin was taken to the Children's Hospital and pronounced dead after she was found hanging in the same basement.

Balachandra said while the first girl who committed suicide had no connection with Child and Family Services, the second suicide victim was receiving services from CFS, but she wasn't in foster care.

The suicide numbers are stark. Almost half the children and teenagers were getting different levels of help from CFS -- three had been in foster care, while in nine of the cases CFS was involved with the family, short of apprehension.

Thirteen of the children and teens were from aboriginal reserves.

Suicide didn't differentiate based on gender, with 13 boys and 12 girls ending their lives.

Four of the suicides were committed by children aged eight to 11, while nine were 12 to 14, and 12 were aged 15 to 17.

And the dying didn't end last year. Balachandra is investigating the suicide of a 13-year-old last weekend.

Michael Jermain Flett, a ward of Métis CFS, hanged himself in a bedroom closet in a foster home. He will be buried today at the Fisher River Cemetery.

Provincial Children's Advocate Billie Schibler said yesterday experts are trying to determine what to do about the increase in suicides.

"This is so concerning to us because we as professionals can't come up with the causes or common thread," said Schibler, who attends the closed-door meetings that the medical examiner's office holds to review each of the deaths.

"The only common factor is somehow all these kids have lost hope and they have decided to end their lives for no reason."

Balachandra admitted it was "unusual" to have two suicides in the same home, but he said the deaths were unconnected, except that the victims were relatives.

"There was something else happening in the family," he said about the second suicide.

"Something was done to her by somebody and she didn't like it."

Balachandra said the first suicide was by the daughter of the owner of the house, while the second was the owner's niece.

Balachandra said CFS officials have already taken action to prevent any more suicides from happening at the home, but he would not say what was done.

Balachandra said he doesn't know what's happening with some of the province's youngest citizens.

He said he knows 2005 has gone down as having the highest number of children committing suicide in years, but "I don't know if it's a blip or a pattern."

"We fully investigate all deaths of children like this."

Conservative family services critic Mavis Taillieu said she's concerned by the increase in the number of suicides and the fact that many youths who kill themselves have been involved with child-welfare agencies.

Taillieu said she is especially troubled by the suicides of the two young cousins living in the same home, since one was involved with CFS.

"It appears to me that there was certainly some negligence in the system here," she said. "I find it very disturbing."

Taillieu said she would like to know what resources were made available to the family after the first child's suicide to ensure they were provided with support and counselling and to help the second child cope with the situation.

After a child commits suicide, a report is generated as a result of an investigation by the chief medical examiner's office. Taillieu said those reports often include recommendations for improvements to the system, but those reports are not made public.

"It doesn't appear that we're using those recommendations to make any progress," she said. "The system is not improving, it's failing."

Family Services and Housing Minister Christine Melnick said she is concerned any time a young person commits suicide.

But she said she believes the transfer of child-welfare programs to aboriginal organizations and a new focus on keeping kids in their home communities and with relatives who know and love them will pay dividends.

"When we see the numbers going up, that is a concern. But we have to look at these situations in a holistic way."

But Schibler said more dollars would help. She pointed to Klinik's Teen Touch phone line, which handles calls from teenagers in crisis across the province each year. It struggles with few paid staff.

"They have 4.5 staff and the rest are volunteers," she said.

"To man a kids' help line for the whole province with 4.5 staff is a huge deficit."

It also comes down to dollars to prevent aboriginal suicides.

Amanda Meawasige, a youth suicide prevention worker with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, said more needs to be done to deal with the disproportionate number of youth suicides that occur in the aboriginal population.

Meawasige said her suicide prevention program received one year of funding from the federal government in 2002, but since then it has operated without federal funding.

"We get phone calls daily from communities requesting our services," she said. "It's frustrating because we know we have the expertise and resources to go and help, but we can't do it."

Meawasige said she spends more time looking for alternative sources of funding than she does doing actual suicide-prevention work.

Statistics released by Balachandra's office this week showed children who committed suicide last year ranged in age from eight to 17.

The youngest child who committed suicide last year was eight-year-old Henry Okemow.

Okemow, who was under the care of the Awasis Agency, a provincial child-welfare agency in northern Manitoba, was found hanging in a closet inside a home on God's Lake Narrows in March 2005.

It was just three days before his suicide that the child was taken out of foster care and reunited with his birth father and four siblings.

Gordon Holens, statistician with the chief medical examiner's office, said as far as he can tell, none of the deaths last year were 'copycat' suicides, where friends depressed about the death of a youth become suicidal themselves.

"The numbers are all over the province -- they're not even in the same community," Holens said.

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## **A tragic story**

### **Child and youth suicide statistics in Manitoba:**

#### **2005:**

- \* Total suicides: 25
- \* No involvement with Child and Family Services (CFS): 13
- \* CFS involved but not in foster care: 9
- \* CFS foster care: 3
- \* Age 8 to 11: 4
- \* Age 12 to 14: 9
- \* Age 15 to 17: 12
- \* Female: 12
- \* Male: 13
- \* Living in Winnipeg: 6
- \* Living on aboriginal reserves: 13
- \* Living in other Manitoba communities or rural areas: 6

#### **2004:**

- \* Total suicides: 18
- \* No involvement with CFS: 13
- \* CFS involved but not in foster care: 2
- \* CFS foster care: 3

#### **2003:**

- \* Total suicides: 12
- \* No involvement with CFS: 8
- \* CFS involved but not in foster care: 4
- \* CFS foster care: 0

#### **2002:**

- \* Total suicides: 14

#### **2001:**

- \* Total suicides: 13

#### **2000:**

Total suicides: 17

-- Source: Chief Medical Examiner's office

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