

Is screening for suicide risk justifiable?

4. Ethical challenges

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Abstract text

In this presentation, it is argued (a) that in many healthcare systems, patients in psychiatric care undergo routine assessments of suicide risk akin to screening, and (b) since medical screening is associated with specific ethical concerns, the same concerns also apply to routine assessment of suicide risk akin to screening. Moreover, (c) it is therefore of interest to analyse to what extent screening for suicide risk meets the ethical standards usually applied to official screening programs. As ethical standards, the so-called Wilson & Jungner criteria are used as a point of departure. These criteria were first published in 1968 on behalf of the WHO in "*Principles and Practice of Screening for Disease*" and are still considered the 'Gold Standard' for assessing screening programs. However, (d) analysis by application of the Wilson & Jungner criteria to the case of suicide risk assessment akin to screening shows that these standards are not met. We discuss the ethical implications of this and potential alternatives to screening for suicide risk that are more ethically defensible, in light of the analysis.