Suicide: the story at MIT

By Norman D. Sandler

Most college students have probably thought about suicide at least once in their lives. Few actually go though with the action, though an associate professor at Bates University reports that on the basis of interviews with psychiatric centers at MIT, many as 400,000 students per year may attempt to take their own lives or actually consider it.

For MIT, students are told early that due to the high degree of academic stress placed on students, the Institute has a high suicide rate. The truth of the matter is that from all indications, MIT's suicide rate is no higher than the national average, and may in fact be lower.

This year has been different. In March, Frederic Sugarman, a junior majoring in biology was found dead in his room in Baker House, presumably after taking a fatal dose of cyanide. Three weeks ago, on April 26, Ronald Lamp, a sophomore majoring in mathematics, was found lying on the sidewalk between the two East Campus parallel, after he had reportedly jumped from the roof of the west parallel.

Surprising to most people is the fact that two suicides in the same month is unusual for MIT, where Dr. Merton Kahne, a psychiatrist in the Medical Department recalls there having been only five or six in the past ten years.

It is an interview with The Tech Kahne explained that suicides by young people are increasing, while those for older people are decreasing, possibly as a result of better health care and medical support and help.

He emphasizes the importance of a student's environment in contributing to his or her ability to cope with the wide range of problems normally encountered by MIT students. MIT is making attempts at increasing contact between residents of the dormitories through the housemates/tutor system. To Kahne, the quality of the environment, and the contact which students have with faculty members is beneficial, but he also suggests that students with problems take advantage of the Medical Department's psychiatric service, "regardless of whether they consider themselves ill."

Kahne estimates that the staff psychiatrists see as many as 15% of the total student body every year, though he is quick to add that "the vast majority of the students who come to see us could hardly be considered ill."

Approximately 40% of the student body at MIT will visit the psychiatric clinic before they leave, according to Medical Department statistics. When asked why people see the psychiatrists, Kahne replied, students visit the clinic sometimes to break out of no-win academic careers, and other times to deal with dormitory or living group or social problems... There is nothing to indicate that the class of problems we encounter are different from anywhere else."

When asked about suicides among college students, Kahne explained that it would be difficult to alter conditions at MIT in order to prevent suicides.

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