

# Minn. man suspected of encouraging suicides

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In a photo made Thursday, Oct. 15, 2009 in Faribault, Minn., William Melchert-Dinkel is shown. Police say Melchert-Dinkel posed as a female nurse on Internet suicide chat rooms offering "expert knowledge" on the most effective way to commit suicide. (AP Photo/Robb Long)

(AP) -- A nurse who authorities say got his kicks by visiting Internet suicide chat rooms and encouraging depressed people to kill themselves is under investigation in at least two deaths and could face criminal charges that could test the limits of the First Amendment.

Investigators said William Melchert-Dinkel, 47, feigned compassion for those he chatted with, while offering step-by-step instructions on how to take their lives.

"Most important is the placement of the noose on the neck ... Knot behind the left ear and rope across the carotid is very important for instant unconsciousness and death," he allegedly wrote in one Web chat.

He is under investigation in the suicides of Mark Drybrough, 32, who hanged himself at his home in Coventry, England, in 2005, and Nadia Kajouji, an 18-year-old from Brampton, Ontario, who drowned in a river in Ottawa, where she was studying at Carleton University.

While the victims' families are frustrated that no charges have been filed, legal experts said prosecuting such a case would be difficult because Melchert-Dinkel didn't physically help kill them. In the meantime, he has been stripped of his nursing license.

"Nothing is going to come of it," Melchert-Dinkel said of the allegations during a brief interview with The Associated Press. "I've moved on with my life, and that's it."

The case came to the attention of Minnesota authorities in March 2008 when an anti-suicide activist in Britain alerted them that someone in the state was using the Internet to manipulate people into killing themselves.

Last May, a Minnesota task force on Internet crimes searched Melchert-Dinkel's computer and found a Web chat between him and the young Canadian woman describing the best way to tie knots. In their search warrant, investigators said Melchert-Dinkel "admitted he has asked persons to watch their suicide via webcam but has not done so."

Authorities said he used such online aliases as "Li Dao," "Cami" and "Falcon Girl."

The Minnesota Board of Nursing, which revoked his license in June, said he encouraged numerous people to commit suicide and told at least one

person that his job as a nurse made him an expert on the most effective way to do it.

The report also said Melchert-Dinkel checked himself into a hospital in January. A nurse's assessment said he had a "suicide fetish" and had formed suicide pacts online that he didn't intend to carry out.

In excerpts of a Web chat between Kajouji and Melchert-Dinkel, provided by Kajouji's mother, he allegedly gave the young woman both emotional support and technical advice on hanging.

"im just tryin to help you do what is best for you not me," one message said, posted using the alias "Cami." Kajouji's mother said she was given a transcript by Ottawa police.

In another exchange, "Cami" tried to persuade Kajouji to hang herself instead of jumping into a freezing river: "if you wanted to do hanging we could have done it together on line so it would not have been so scary for you"

Melchert-Dinkel, who lives in Faribault, about 45 miles from Minneapolis, worked at various hospitals and nursing homes over the years and was cited several times for neglect and being rough with patients, according to the nursing board.

Task force spokesman Paul Schnell would not say when or if charges would be filed and stressed that the investigation is complicated because of the anonymity of Web chat rooms. He said the task force is also looking into whether Melchert-Dinkel was involved in other suicides.

In obtaining the search warrant for Melchert-Dinkel's computer, Minnesota authorities cited a decades-old, rarely used state law that makes it a crime to encourage someone to commit suicide. The offense

carries up to 15 years in prison.

The law does not specifically address situations involving the Internet or suicides that occur out of state.

George Washington University Law School professor Jonathan Turley, who follows the issue of physician-assisted suicide, said he has never heard of anyone being prosecuted for encouraging a suicide over the Internet.

Typically, people are prosecuted only if they physically help someone end it all - for example, by giving the victim a gun, a noose or drugs. Last month, a Florida man was charged in his wife's [suicide](#) after allegedly tossing several loaded guns onto their bed.

Turley said if prosecutors file charges against Melchert-Dinkel, convicting him will be difficult - especially if the defense claims freedom of speech.

The law professor said efforts to make it illegal to shout "Jump!" to someone on a bridge have not survived constitutional challenges. "What's the difference between calling for someone to jump off a bridge and e-mailing the same exhortation?" he said.

But Kajouji's mother, Deborah Chevalier, said in an e-mail: "He is a predator who is responsible for several deaths and needs to be held legally accountable for them."

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