The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Before it's too late:

Report on early intervention programs aimed at preventing youth suicide

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing

July 2011
Canberra

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Contents

Foreword v
Membership of the Committee vii
Terms of Reference ix
List of Recommendations x

THE REPORT

1 Introduction 1
Conduct of the Inquiry 2
42nd Parliament 2
43rd Parliament 2
Senate Committee Inquiry and Report 4
Structure of the Report 5

2 Understanding Youth Suicide 7
Statistics on Suicide in Australia 7
Collecting and Reporting Suicide Statistics 11
Committee Comment 13
Factors Affecting the Likelihood of Suicide 15
Committee Comment 17

3 Interventions to Reduce Youth Suicide 19
Early Intervention Approaches 19
Indicated Interventions 20

Selective Interventions 21
Universal Interventions 22
National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy 23
National Suicide Prevention Strategy 23
Committee Comment 25
Additional Support for Suicide Prevention Interventions 27
Committee Comment 28
Research into Youth Suicide and Program Evaluation 29
Committee Comment 30

4 A Strategic Approach to Youth Suicide 35

Collaboration 35
Collaboration with Young People 36
Collaboration between Governments 36
Collaboration between Service Providers 38
Committee Comment 40
Mental Health Literacy 42
Committee Comment 44
'Gatekeeper' Training 46
Committee Comment 49

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A – List of Submissions 51
Appendix B – List of Exhibits 53
Appendix C – List of Roundtable Forums and Briefing 59

Foreword

Every year in Australia suicide claims the lives of around 2000 Australians placing it ahead of road traffic accidents and skin cancer as a cause of death. For young people aged 15 to 24, it is the number one cause of death. Despite this, in recent years the issues of mental health and suicide prevention have received comparatively less mainstream policy attention and seemingly less program funding than well resourced and public road safety and sun protection campaigns. The tide is starting to turn. New, strong and ever growing community engagement with these issues now place mental health and suicide prevention firmly on the national policy agenda for political parties of all persuasions who recognise both the complex nature of the issue but also the impact that a single suicide can have on families, communities, schools and workplaces. There has also been a noticeable shift toward more open discussion and debate surrounding the issue of suicide including the role the media play in reporting on the issue; an important conversation to have particularly in the social media era.

Despite the alarming statistics the Inquiry has found some encouraging results to show that the situation can be improved. Evidence presented has suggested that as a result of measures taken by successive Governments, the rate of youth suicide has been in decline since 1997. The Committee's investigation, which included roundtable discussions with young people and community organisations, focussed on the potential for early intervention programs to further reduce rates of suicide in this age group. These discussions highlighted to the Committee, the important role that young people play in the development of early intervention strategies aimed at assisting their peers. The Committee was impressed by the number of young people who contributed to the work of organisations through volunteering and by holding positions of responsibility.

In terms of formulating its recommendations, the Committee would particularly like to thank the young people who provided confidential, yet candid accounts of their experiences to the Committee in Sydney in 2010. Their contribution was invaluable and the courage demonstrated in speaking to the Committee about a very sensitive issue was appreciated by all Members of the Committee. Their

stories were a testament to the resilience and determination of many young people in Australia who have battled mental health issues or have contemplated taking their own lives.

The Committee has used the evidence presented to it make a number of recommendations which it hopes will lead to better policy and program outcomes. Key recommendations include approaches to reducing the rate of youth suicide, research and evaluation to inform best-practice strategies, collaboration, increasing mental health literacy and 'gatekeeper' training.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my Committee colleagues for their contributions to the report. I would also like to thank the Committee Secretariat for all their assistance and help. I would also like to thank the witnesses who spoke to the Committee in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, along with those who made written submissions to the inquiry.

Mr Steve Georganas MP
Chair

Membership of the Committee

43rd Parliament

Chair	Mr Steve Georganas MP	
Deputy Chair	Mr Steve Irons MP	
Members	Mr Mark Coulton MP	Ms Deb O'Neill MP
	Ms Jill Hall MP	Mr Ken Wyatt MP
	Mr Geoff Lyons MP	

42nd Parliament

Chair	Mr Steve Georganas MP	
Deputy Chair	Mr Steve Irons MP	
Members	The Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP *(from 3/2/10)*	Mrs Catherine King MP
	Mr Mark Coulton MP *(to 3/2/10)*	Mrs Margaret May MP *(to 3/2/10)*
	Mrs Joanna Gash MP	Mr Shayne Neumann MP *(from 3/2/10)*
	Ms Jill Hall MP	Ms Amanda Rishworth MP
	Mrs Julia Irwin MP	Dr Andrew Southcott MP

Committee Secretariat

43rd Parliament

Secretaries	Dr Alison Clegg *(from 24/2/11)*
	Ms Sharon Bryant *(to 23/2/11)*
Inquiry Secretary	Mr Muzammil Ali
Research Officers	Ms Belynda Zolotto
	Mr Thomas Gregory
Administrative Officers	Mr Shaun Rowe
	Ms Claire Young

42nd Parliament

Secretary	Ms Sharon Bryant
Inquiry Secretary	Ms Penny Wijnberg
Administrative Officers	Mrs Jazmine Rakic
	Mr Shaun Rowe

Terms of Reference

That the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, after reviewing the 2008-2009 annual report of the Department of Health and Ageing and pursuant to Standing Order 215(c), take evidence on the topic of youth suicide.

List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the National Committee for the Standardised Reporting of Suicide consider options for, and the feasibility of, extending the scope of social and demographic suicide data routinely collected and reported on, to include information on:

- ethnicity;
- culture;
- geography;
- educational attainment;
- employment status; and
- socio-economic status. *(para 2.23)*

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the National Committee for the Standardised Reporting of Suicide consider options for providing increased access to disaggregated suicide data. *(para 2.24)*

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian Suicide Prevention Advisory Council liaise with the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council, government departments (including state and territory government departments) and other agencies with a role in this domain, to develop a priority research agenda for youth suicide, with a view to jointly supporting a coordinated and targeted program of research. *(para 3.42)*

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends the Department of Health and Ageing, in conjunction with state and territory governments, facilitate the sharing of evaluations of existing programs and youth-suicide research across the entire suicide-prevention sector, through the establishment and maintenance of an online program-evaluation clearinghouse. *(para 3.50)*

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in consultation with state and territory governments and other key stakeholders, undertake appropriate consultation and engagement with young people to:

- further develop approaches to youth suicide prevention as part of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy;
- development new youth suicide prevention initiatives and programs;
- to evaluate existing youth suicide prevention measures; and
- share information. *(para 4.19)*

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government establish well defined linkages with existing programs addressing issues of cultural, educational, employment, social and economic disadvantage, so that initiatives under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy are recognised as an integral part of a holistic approach to youth suicide prevention. *(para 4.22)*

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government, in consultation with state and territory governments and non-government stakeholders, establish partnerships between departments of education and community-based service providers to ensure continuity of care for school leavers by facilitating referral of students to external counselling services where appropriate. *(para 4.25)*

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority include social development education and mental health as a core component of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools. *(para 4.35)*

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that social development and mental health education for older secondary school students include specific components to assist them to be better prepared for moving from school into the workforce or higher education, and aware of the full range of services available to assist them as they transition from child to adult services. *(para 4.37)*

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that teachers receive mandatory training on mental health awareness, including specific training to develop their capacity to recognise and assess suicidal risk. *(para 4.51)*