

24 September 2020

Committee Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee

By email to: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Re: National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee regarding the proposed legislation for the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (National Commissioner). This submission will focus on the National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention Bill 2020 (the Bill).

The RANZCP is a membership organisation that is responsible for training, educating and representing psychiatrists in Australia and New Zealand. The RANZCP has more than 6900 members, including over 5100 qualified psychiatrists and more than 1800 trainee members. We are guided on policy matters by a range of expert committees, such as the Military, Veterans and Emergency Services Personnel Mental Health Network Committee, which is well-placed to provide advice in relation to the establishment of the National Commissioner.

The RANZCP is committed to supporting people in suicidal distress and working with governments and communities to prevent suicides. We know that discharged veterans are at much greater risk of suicide compared to the wider population and warrant particular attention and support.[1] For further details, please see the RANZCP's [Position Statement 99: The mental health of veterans and defence force service members](#).

The RANZCP welcomes the proposed functions of the National Commissioner included in the Bill, noting that they are comprehensive. The RANZCP also supports the general principles of the performance of the National Commissioner, in particular that it should take a restorative and trauma-informed approach with families at the centre of its work. This approach is recognised by psychiatrists as an effective measure particularly when assessing and treating victims of bullying in the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

The RANZCP emphasises that the National Commissioner should be independent from the ADF and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This will make a positive difference in how the National Commissioner operates and reports. It will also enhance the confidence of veterans and their family members in the capacity of the National Commissioner to support the prevention of ADF member and veteran deaths by suicide.



Further, in order to ensure the National Commissioner acts as a system improvement function as is intended, the RANZCP recommends a formal arrangement be established within the Bill for a panel of mental health advisers. This will ensure the role of medical expertise in understanding the issues that contribute to defence and veteran deaths by suicide. The RANZCP would like to offer our significant expertise to the panel should it be established.

The provision of targeted and seamless support to survivors of suicide, including impacted families, friends, carers and communities, should be integrated into the work of the National Commissioner. Such support should be underpinned by a skilled workforce, including psychiatrists, with specialised knowledge of military mental health.

It is critical that the National Commissioner supports wider suicide prevention efforts, including by collaborating with the National Suicide Prevention Adviser. Ensuring a collaborative approach will lead to a greater understanding of the individual, environmental and systemic factors involved in suicide.

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor John Allan
President

Ref: 1913

Reference

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. National suicide monitoring of serving and ex-serving Australian Defence Force personnel: 2019 update. Canberra; 29 November 2019. p39