



**Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian:
*Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety***

The Queensland Commission is committed to identifying opportunities to inform policy formulation and prevention efforts at both a state and national level and welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety.

Overview of the Commission's functions

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) is an independent statutory body charged with responsibility for protecting and promoting the rights, interests, and wellbeing of Queensland children and young people under the age of 18, particularly those most vulnerable. Under the *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000*, the Commission has research and advocacy functions related to individual children and the development of laws, policies, and practices supporting service delivery to vulnerable children. The Commission also has a statutory obligation to maintain a register of all deaths of children and young people under the age of 18 that are registered in Queensland. The information in the register is required to be classified according to cause of death, demographic information and other relevant factors. In this capacity, the Commission has responsibility for the centralised collection, coding and analysis of mortality information for both coronial and non-coronial child deaths.

The Commission's capture and analysis of child death information and data, together with its capacity to report across all causes of deaths is a valuable evidence base that can be used by a wide range of stakeholders to identify opportunities to reduce or remove risk factors associated with child deaths and promote prevention messages. The child death review work undertaken by the Commission is substantively valuable to government and the community and clearly demonstrates the importance of thoroughly reflecting on the risks that exists in children's lives with a view to reducing the potential for harm. The Commission's child death review processes are effective in this way over

and above the work traditionally performed by statistical bodies, because it probes beyond a compilation of death certificate data and routinely involves consideration of autopsies, coronial files, child protection and police information.

The Commission's role in relation to cyber-safety

The emergence of online social communication and networking presents young people with opportunities to explore and engage in additional spheres of communication. Platforms such as facebook, twitter, YouTube, MSN, MySpace, Skype, and mobile telephone sms and mms provide young people with powerful and on-trend forums in which to communicate in a simple, immediate, cost-effective, and convenient manner. Although a large proportion of young people may find their online social networking experiences safe and positive, the primary issues relating to cyber-safety (including the abuse of children online, exposure to illegal and inappropriate content, inappropriate behaviours in an online environment, identity theft, and breaches of privacy) via one or more of these platforms are serious threats to the rights, interests, and well being of children and young people. The Commission is a stakeholder in supporting initiatives and responses to these broader cyber-safety issues.

The Commission is involved in issues relating to cyber-safety and children and young people on an increasing basis, and is committed to identifying opportunities to address these issues through the provision of evidence-based research, analysis, and advice. Online behaviour following the death of a child or young person, particularly when the death is by suicide, is area current area of interest to the Commission. The Commission's submission will therefore focus on this challenging cyber-safety issue.

Summary of the Commission's comments

1. The Commission's body of work relating to suicide and young people highlights that contagion suicide (where one suicide event leads to another) is a serious issue requiring dedicated prevention, intervention, and postvention responses.
2. The current online environment for young people is 'viral' in nature with significant communication occurring via social networking internet sites such as facebook and twitter.

3. Online behaviour following the death of a child or young person is an area being monitored by the Commission from an observational perspective, to inform child death reviews.
4. Online memorial pages following the suicide of a young person may increase the risk of suicide contagion. This is due to a number of factors, including that suicides may be glorified and over-simplified, the pages may contain unsafe and inaccurate content, and that these pages may incite or support harassing behaviour and abuse.
5. The Commission has proposed three recommendations which relate to the development of policies and procedures to manage online behaviour following the death of a child or young person and further education in relation to the risks of online memorial pages created to commemorate children. The recommendations are:

- 1. *That relevant stakeholders including government, schools, and community agencies, develop procedural guidelines for managing online behaviour after the suicide of a young person***
- 2. *That government liaises with facebook to develop specific policy and procedures for managing memorial pages***
- 3. *That education initiatives are introduced in relation to the risks of memorial pages and the need for constant moderation and review of these pages***

The Commission's key findings in relation to contagion suicide

Over the past seven years the Commission has undertaken a significant body of work in relating to the issue of child and youth suicide in Queensland. The Commission's findings in relation to youth suicide through the Reducing Youth Suicide in Queensland (RYSQ) project together with its Child Death Annual Reports provide a solid and contemporary evidence base to inform prevention efforts targeted at children and young people with the aim of reducing youth suicide in Queensland. The findings from the RYSQ Project and the Commission's Child Death Annual Reports available on the Commission's website at www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au.

The Commission's findings in relation to suicide have identified common risk factors and circumstances among children and young people who have suicided in Queensland. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the suicide of one person may trigger suicidal behaviour in those associated with that person, or in vulnerable people who become aware of the suicide (contagion suicide). This can occur in a number of ways including:

- seeing the person who completed suicide and being involved in the aftermath
- having talked with or seen the person on the day of the suicide
- belonging to the family of the person
- attending the same school or a neighbouring school
- learning of the attempted or completed suicide of a role model or respected community member, and
- reading or hearing about the death in the media.

Contagion suicide and suicide clusters have been repeatedly identified as risk factors requiring a coordinated, multi-agency postvention approach. The aim of postvention is to provide support and advice on how to grieve and cope for those bereaved by suicide. Postvention is considered a crucial factor in reducing the risk of further suicides among bereaved and affected persons. It is essential that any postvention response involves not only those children who were directly known to the suicide victim, but also those who may not have known the young person but who may have heard about the suicide.

The Commission's analysis of the suicides of children and young people has identified that between 1 January 2004 and 30 April 2009, 42% of youth suicides were contagion or imitative suicides – that is, there is evidence that the child or young person took their own life following the suicide or attempted suicide of a friend or peer, family or community member. A number of these children and young people had attended the same or a neighbouring school.

When a school student attempts or completes suicide, the consequent effect on the school community can be traumatising. However, it is clear that the occurrence of a suicide can also contribute to an increased risk of suicide in other vulnerable students. New media and the viral nature of the online environment presents a particular challenge

for the schools and other agencies involved in the delivery of services to young people following a suicide or attempted suicide due to the sheer speed and breadth at which information travels via social networking internet sites and mobile telephone sms.

Distinct clusters of suicides have been identified in the Toowoomba and Mackay regions. This information was provided to the Queensland Police Service (QPS) to assist in the development of a targeted strategy responding to youth suicide. In 2009–10, QPS initiated the Impacted Children Project (ICP) which aims to structure a whole-of-government co-ordinated postvention strategy to reduce the incidence of contagion and cluster youth suicides. Information sharing between relevant agencies is designed to assist in the identification of impacted children and the delivery of co-ordinated postvention support services.

The Impacted Children Steering Committee, chaired by QPS, consists of representatives from Queensland Health, Department of Education and Training, Department of Communities, Queensland Catholic Education Commission, Brisbane Catholic Education, Association of Independent Schools Queensland, and the Commission. The ICP was piloted in Mackay and Toowoomba throughout 2010 and it was envisioned that localised hubs would be formed by relevant officers of the partner organisations who would convene to identify what postvention supports, if any, were required in their community in the wake of a child or youth suicide. The pilot program has concluded and is currently undergoing evaluation.

Online behaviour following the suicide of a young person

While the Commission does not have a specific function to monitor internet usage by young people - even when it relates to the death of a child or young person, observations identified in relation to online memorial pages have been instructive in child death reviews, particularly in identifying suicide risk factors. However, the Commission does not hold a specific data set about online activities that would fully define the nature and extent of the issues, and has based this submission on trends identified during research into young people who suicide.

Facebook ‘memorial pages’ created after the death of a child or young person are now commonplace. The intended purpose of memorial pages is for facebook users to post and display commemorative comments, reflective thoughts, and multi-media on the ‘wall’

of the memorial page. Most memorial pages are publicly available to all facebook users and can be created, viewed, and updated by anyone with a facebook account. It is not uncommon for some memorial pages to have thousands of followers who are updating the page several times throughout a day.

The Commission is aware of several facebook memorial pages dedicated to young people who suicided in Queensland over the past two years. A large proportion of these pages appear to have been created and maintained by peers (primarily schoolmates) however some memorial pages are being maintained by family members. Many young people who have suicided have multiple memorial pages, with some pages attracting thousands of followers. There is an identified trend towards some followers leaving posts on a memorial page on a daily or even more frequent basis. Of concern is that help-seeking behaviour, misinformation, and accusations have been identified within some of the posts left by users.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicates publicity may encourage suicidal behaviour in vulnerable children and young people. Research suggests that an association exists between non-fictional portrayal of suicide in film, television and newspaper articles and actual suicides, and that this may represent a causal relationship. The magnitude of this increase is suggested to be proportional to the amount of publicity given to a suicide and that the impact of suicide publicity on subsequent completed suicides is reported to be greatest for adolescents.

The Commission recognises that online memorial pages can be outlets for family, friends, and the general public to express their feelings of grief, sorrow, or even confusion following the suicide of a young person. However, there is current concern that online memorial pages created after the suicide of a young person may increase the risk of contagion, imitative, or copycat suicides due to:

- the act of suicide appearing glamorised, romanticised, or glorified (whether intentional or unintentional)
- the comments and discussions posted on memorial pages being ongoing, inaccurate, and unsafe

- other young people using the page to express suicidal feelings or help-seeking behaviour being overlooked, ignored, or ridiculed
- harassment and bullying directed at young persons who themselves have been identified as bullies who in some way contributed to a suicide
- suicides being over-simplified (e.g. suicide is seen as a normal response to bullying), and
- young people contemplating suicide as a means of attracting attention after witnessing the notoriety and fanfare attached to online memorial pages.

Of concern is that due to the viral nature of the online environment, other young people may first learn of the suicide via facebook rather than from a more appropriate means (such as through parents or a school postvention program) which can then prompt feelings of shock, confusion, and panic. To demonstrate the nature of today's online environment, in a recent case publicised in the media, the Sydney parents of a 17-year old boy killed in a vehicle accident were informed of their son's death via facebook memorial pages which had already been created. An additional issue is that memorial pages may actually cause further grief for family and friends who have limited control over their existence and are faced with 'trolling' (see below) and other forms of harassment. The ongoing nature of online memorial pages may also inhibit their ability to cope and move on.

Internationally, several suicide prevention organisations have acknowledged the challenges relating to online behaviour following the suicide of a young person and have consequently developed proactive and effective responses to these challenges. Some initiatives in existence include the development of procedures for the online management of youth suicide and working with family, friends, and schools to help them identify online responses to suicide and understand the risks in relation to contagion suicide. At least one suicide prevention group in the United States has prepared some suggested wording for posting to memorial pages on social networking sites. The suggested wording includes links and information on where to go for help if users are feeling helpless or contemplating suicide. Another positive initiative is the suicide alerting partnerships between facebook and suicide prevention organisations in some

countries in response to facebook users who post worrying status updates suggesting suicide.

Conclusion and recommendations

In reducing the risk of contagion suicides, it is suggested that relevant stakeholders (government, community organisations, and schools) coordinate guidelines for managing online behaviour following the suicide of a young person. These could include some recommended wording for posting on identified memorial pages (including information on warning signs and where to go for help); school policy in relation to student conduct and online memorial pages; and information for the parents, families, and friends of young people who have suicided on identifying and managing online memorial pages. Guidelines could be incorporated into existing postvention programs.

Recommendations

- 1. That relevant stakeholders including government, schools, and community agencies, develop procedural guidelines for managing online behaviour after the suicide of a young person***
- 2. That government liaises with facebook to develop specific policy and procedures for managing memorial pages***
- 3. That education initiatives are introduced in relation to the risks of memorial pages and the need for constant moderation and review of these pages***

The reality of today's online social networking environment is such that contributing to memorial pages is the normal and expected response from young people in understanding and coping with the death of someone known or unknown to them. However, the Commission is concerned that memorial pages created following the suicide of a young person may increase the risk of contagion suicide. This submission has outlined some of the identifying factors contributing to this increased risk, such as the idea that memorial pages glorify and sensationalise suicide and that they may contain misinformation and are difficult to control.

Online behaviour following the death of a child or young person is a challenging area of cyber-safety requiring further research. One of the primary challenges is finding and applying a balance between open communication and the rights, interests, and well

being of children and young people. The Commission strongly supports the development of initiatives to protect children and young people from harm caused by inappropriate online social behaviour following the death of a child or young person.