

Committee Secretary
Senate Community Affairs References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament house
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into Suicide in Australia

Dear Sir/Madam

I would like to tell my story of the effect my son's suicide, 12 years ago, has had on my family. I welcome this opportunity as I believe the effects of suicide on families and communities are not fully known by government, essential services, helping agencies or the wider public and that a deeper understanding would lead to improvements in current services.

My son, Nicholas, was 20 years old when he took his own life and his death was, I believe, triggered by the death of his older sister, Deborah, two years before. At the time of Debbie's death – she too was 20 years old – my second marriage had just ended and I was a single parent with three children from the first marriage and two much younger children from the second marriage.

Debbie was a passenger in the car of her flatmate's friend. She and her boyfriend, Andrew, had accepted a lift to Andrew's place but unfortunately no-one realized that the driver had been drinking at work all afternoon and was drunk when he made the offer. Debbie was dead three minutes after she got into the car when it slammed into the bluestone fence of Genezzano Girls' College in Kew.

The shock of Debbie's death sent Nick on a destructive course of marijuana use (I think he had been dabbling before but now he started smoking a lot because he said it took the pain away) which quickly degenerated into drug induced psychosis and the delusional belief that I was responsible for Debbie's death and would also kill my two youngest children – Timothy who was then four years old and Benjamin who was two. Nick decided to kill Tim and Ben himself as he was certain he would give them a much easier death than the one he believed I would inflict on them.

After several frightening incidents including Nick setting fire to our house on several occasions once even burning down the fencing, garage and car. The night he shut us in the house overnight while he patrolled the passageway to ensure we didn't escape Nick was made an involuntary patient and secured in the mental health facility at Box Hill Hospital. On his release

he was placed under the care of the Department of Human Services (DHS) in a DHS flat while waiting for a vacancy in a secured 24-hour residential facility.

The combined trauma of Debbie's death and Nick's psychosis sent my blood pressure to astronomical heights and my GP recommended I give up work for the time being and organized the Sole Parent Pension for me. Because of the on-going risk to Tim and Ben from Nick I also decided to put the house on the market and move to a secret location in the country but the day before the signs went up, Melbourne Cup Day 1997, Nick knelt in front of an on-coming train and was killed.

To this day we do not know why – I'm sure he didn't know we planned to leave Melbourne and he certainly didn't leave any notes behind. My private belief is that he had a recurrence of his Jesus Christ belief that he would rise again from the dead within three days. He was also within a few days of the exact age Debbie was when she died and might have had some crazy idea she too would return from her death – but we will never know.

His death was, initially, a great relief and, having no idea what to do next and being financially very distressed I continued with my plan – sold the house and we moved to our current address. Before we left though I had to negotiate staggered payments for his funeral with the funeral company as I lacked the funds to pay the bill.

I remember very little of our first few years in Casterton, our new home. I was still grieving for Debbie, angry with Nick, barely functioning as a parent and totally un-ready to return to work. Prior to Nick's death I was an Acting Manager at DHS on a salary of \$67,000, living in a very nice house in Box Hill South, but with a substantial mortgage and expecting to continue to rise in the public service. After his suicide I was on welfare benefits, spending most of my day sitting in my bedroom staring at the walls.

Gradually, I became more functional and by the time Ben started school I had a part-time job in welfare, and was beginning to make friends and join some local community groups. Today, 12 years on, we are still picking up the pieces. I now work full-time, but my salary is only around \$45,000 and we still live from week to week. I doubt I will ever return to the salary or level of work I used to do. I have finally accepted that there is nothing to forgive Nick for, as he could not help his susceptibility to marijuana and his psychosis.

Last year, following some disturbing behaviour displayed by Tim, who was then 16, he was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from Debbie and Nick's deaths and successfully treated. His psychologist also strongly urged me to have myself and Ben assessed – but so far I haven't been able to take that step. My relationship with my family has resumed, although initially I couldn't speak with, or visit them for several years as they were a reminder of happier times. My oldest son, Adam, who blamed me for Nick's death for years has also finally realized

that I was not to blame and our relationship has also re-established. The rift with my second husband – which we were trying to work through at the time of Debbie’s death – was never solved and he has had no contact with Tim or Ben for the past six years.

I am an active volunteer on several committees again, and have been able to disclose my story to close friends. I find that the topic is too confronting for casual acquaintances and only disclose to really close friends. On a positive note, both Tim and Ben are adamant they will never try drugs themselves because both remember the terrible effect marihuana had on Nick and that Debbie’s death was due to a drunk teenager. I am hopeful that, now I am no longer angry at Nick for what he put us through, I might one day be able to mourn him properly.

I cannot speak highly enough of the support I received at the time from Nick’s mental health worker (who was so distressed when Nick suicided that he was off work for three months) the Crisis Assessment Team (CAT) workers who sectioned him, the police, my GP, the coroner, the psychologist who treated Tim and also wanted to help Ben and me.

Obviously, if more funds were available, Nick could have had the 24-hour secured accommodation he needed, but we are not the only families to have been thus short changed. Today, with BeyondBlue and **headspace**, better services are available for informing the public about services for people with mental health illnesses that they were 12 years ago.

Community awareness campaigns could be expanded though to include personal stories from family members, such as myself, along the model of the personal impact stories on road trauma that are available to change the behaviour of convicted drink drivers. And probably a campaign to encourage family members (myself, for example) to seek help after a suicide bereavement would also be a good idea.

Clearly, the effects of suicide on families is a whole of life issue and the work of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy should be encouraged and expanded.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit my story. I hope it helps inform your findings.

Cathy Harbison