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Senate Community Affairs References Committee
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**A Submission to the
Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee
Inquiry into Suicide in Australia**

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By

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Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to this important Inquiry.

We commend this Inquiry's goal to facilitate and support best practice in suicide prevention, and to identify limitations in knowledge, research and policy, as well as gain better understanding of the many challenges faced by those working in the field of suicide prevention. We are hopeful that the Inquiry will lead to improvements in evidence-based suicide prevention policy, practice, and service delivery in Australia.

To contribute to these outcomes, this submission shares a small selection of our experiences and observations over almost a decade researching suicide rates and suicide prevention.

We would be pleased to offer further comment on any of the issues raised below.

Background

In the past few years we have produced many peer reviewed publications on the topic of suicide prevention in the (often highly emotive) context of firearms legislation. As such, our experiences along the way provide various insights into the nature of research in that particular area.

Briefly, we have examined trends in suicide rates (firearm and non firearm) over various periods of time, and by gender. We have found little scientific evidence to support the view that Australia's firearms legislation had any effect on reducing suicide rates (example executive summaries are given at Attachment A). This finding has been confirmed and replicated in various forms by other researchers from diverse institutions and backgrounds (e.g., Klieve et al 2009; Lee & Suardi, 2008).

Comments Under the Terms of Reference

We wish to address parts (b) and (g) of the Terms of Reference of this Inquiry.

Given our specific field of expertise, the following comments – although potentially applicable to other areas of suicide prevention research – should be taken to refer to research into suicide and suicide prevention in the context of firearms legislation.

(b) The accuracy of suicide reporting in Australia, factors that may impede accurate identification and recording of possible suicides, (and the consequences of any under-reporting on understanding risk factors and providing services to those at risk)

We are certain that other submissions will discuss this matter in detail. However, we note a range of problems with the statistical recording and reporting of suicides by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) – a matter previously highlighted by Dr McPhedran in the 2008 Senate Inquiry into Mental Health Services in Australia.

Specifically, the number of suicides recorded by the ABS in recent years appears to be substantially lower than the actual number of suicides recorded in Coronial files. This issue has recently been taken up by others, and we understand that a revised set of ABS figures will be made available in the near future.

Rectifying inaccuracies in ABS data will allow improved assessment of the impacts of current mental health strategies aimed at suicide prevention, and will facilitate the development of a sound empirical basis to guide future interventions.

Unfortunately, the current data inaccuracies suggest that the apparent overall declines in suicide since the late 1990s may not be as pronounced as previously thought, which, if correct, has far reaching implications for policy and practice.

(g) The adequacy of the current program of research into suicide and suicide prevention, and the manner in which findings are disseminated to practitioners and incorporated into government policy

The quality of evidence-based suicide prevention policy relies on the availability of quality research. While adequate research funding and support for researchers are vital to this, the availability of quality research also relies upon:

- The integrity and independence of the academic peer review process;
- The freedom of research from suppression and/or censorship;
- The freedom for researchers to challenge ideology, without being subject to personal attack, discrimination, and/or vilification; and
- Transparency and objectivity around ways in which research is delivered to policymakers, and how that research feeds into the policy process.

Through the course of our work, a number of shortcomings have come to our attention about the way in which Australian research into suicide and suicide prevention (in the context of firearms legislation) is scrutinised, published, and disseminated to policymakers. These troubling observations include instances where:

- Insufficiently scrutinised work has been ‘fast tracked’ after discussion between the author/s and journal editor (examples at Attachment B);
- Standard peer review processes have been bypassed (examples at Attachment C), and;
- Poor quality research has been passed on to government employees involved in the field of health policy, in a way that appears to be based on the development and use of personal relationships between researchers and government employees rather than through open, equitable, and transparent processes (Attachment D).

We have also experienced attempted suppression and censoring of our work, and ongoing efforts to discredit our integrity (Attachment E).

Implications for suicide prevention

The actions outlined above, individually and collectively, undermine the advancement of quality research about suicide and suicide prevention.

Additionally, these occurrences demonstrate a series of failings of the current academic system in Australia (and internationally), in the field of suicide prevention research.

These failings have flow-on implications for the development of Australian suicide prevention policy, and evidence-based policy in general.

We therefore urge the Committee, when delivering its recommendations, to:

- *Note* the issues raised in this submission;
- *Recognise* the implications of those issues for evidence-based suicide prevention policy in Australia; and
- *Endorse* the need for independent and rigorous peer review of academic work, freedom of research from suppression or censorship, and the importance of using open and transparent policy development processes, in order to promote quality evidence in the field of suicide prevention.

References

- Klieve, H., Barnes, M., & De Leo, D. (2009). Controlling firearms use in Australia: Has the 1996 gun law reform produced the decrease in rates of suicide with this method? *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 44: 285-292.
- Lee, W-S., & Suardi, S. (2008). *The Australian firearms buyback and its effect on gun deaths*. Working Paper No. 17/08. Melbourne Institute: Melbourne.

Recent Australian Suicide Trends for Males and Females at the National Level: Has the Rate of Decline Differed?

McPhedran, S., & Baker, J. (2008). *Health Policy*. doi: 10.1016/j.healthpol.2008.01.009

Executive Summary:

Introduction

- In 1995 the Australian Federal Government introduced the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (NYSPS), followed by the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) in 1999.
- The fall in overall suicide rates in Australia since the late 1990's has been interpreted as evidence that increased attention to suicide prevention has begun to influence the occurrence of suicide.
- Little research has evaluated whether Australian trends in suicide have differed between genders since the peak in suicides in 1997.
- A national benchmark for suicide trends by gender, against which suicide patterns among select subgroups can be contrasted, would enable clearer identification of prevention priorities.
- The Australian situation also provides a natural quasi-experimental design whereby method restriction (firearms legislation) versus generalised intervention can be examined.

Method

- Suicide incidence by method data were obtained for the period 1997-2005.
- 1997 was chosen as the starting point because it represented the epoch at which suicides were at their highest, and the point from which the overall decline in suicides has become apparent.
- Trends in suicide rates between males and females were compared.

Results

- Both male and female suicide rates have undergone downwards trends since 1997.
- Male suicides fell at a faster rate than female suicides.
- Male nonfirearm suicide fell significantly faster than either male firearm suicide or female nonfirearm suicide.

Conclusions

- At the national level, it appears that males – an 'at risk' group overall - are benefiting from national suicide prevention strategies. Awareness raising campaigns directed towards males are likely to have had positive influences.
- However, it is also possible that males are affected by external factors (risk and/or protective) to a greater extent than females.
- Economic variables may contribute substantially to Australian male suicide, but less so to female suicide. This has implications for gender-specific public health policy and suicide prevention campaigns.
- Male nonfirearm suicides fell more quickly than male firearm suicides, contrary to the prediction that restricting legal access to firearms would lead to faster declines in firearm suicide relative to nonfirearm suicide.
- Social and economic change, coupled with prevention strategies emphasising detection and early intervention, may play a more influential role than method restriction in reducing suicide rates in Australia.
- It is recommended that greater consideration be given to female suicide risk factors such as intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and substance dependence.

Gun Laws and Sudden Death: Did the Australian Firearms Legislation of 1996 Make a Difference?

Baker, J., & McPhedran, S. (2006). *British Journal of Criminology*. DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azl084

Executive Summary:

Introduction

- After the 1996 mass killing of 35 people, Australia rapidly enacted gun controls that are considered among the most stringent in the developed world.
- Semi-automatic rifles and semi-automatic and pump action shotguns were prohibited.
- A government funded 'buyback' scheme compensated owners for handing in their firearms. Over 600 000 firearms were destroyed.
- The effects of the reform remain contentious, particularly regarding the usefulness of the buyback of 'low risk' firearms.
- This study evaluated the benefits of buying back legally held firearms and increasing restrictions on firearm owners using data spanning the years before the introduction of the 1996 legislation and eight years following the implementation of the legislation.

Method

- Suicide and homicide by methods other than firearm were included to provide a control against which the political, social, and economic culture into which additional legislative requirements for civilian firearm ownership occurred could be evaluated.
- Publicly available data spanning the period 1979-2004 were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Criminology, and National Injury Surveillance Unit.
- Figures were standardised to rates per 100 000 population.
- Observed rates of firearm suicide and firearm homicide were compared with predicted rates, based on projections of pre-existing downwards trends.

Key Findings

- The reforms did not affect rates of firearm homicide in Australia.
- The reforms could not be shown to alter rates of firearm suicide, because rates of suicide using other methods also began to decline in the late 1990's.
- It is likely that social changes including increased resource allocation for suicide prevention impacted on rates of suicide by all methods, including firearm.
- It must be concluded that the gun buyback and restrictive legislative changes had no influence on firearm homicide in Australia.
- It cannot be concluded that the reforms altered firearm suicide rates.
- There is insufficient evidence to support the premise that reducing the stockpile of legally held civilian firearms will result in a reduction in either firearm or overall sudden death rates.
- The lack of effect of a massive buyback and associated legislative changes in the requirements for obtaining a firearm licence or legally possessing a firearm has significant implications for public and justice policy, not only in Australia but internationally.