

PRESENTATION BY PASTOR ERIC J. TREZISE. O.A.M. M.A.I.W.C.W.

SUICIDE & SELF-HARM PREVENTION CONSULTANT. GRIEF & TRAUMA COUNSELLOR.

SUBMISSION TO - THE CHAIRMAN, THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MEN'S HEALTH.

In submitting this paper I would seek to highlight the many factors, other than the purely medical state of men's health, or any suggested reluctance on their part to seek treatment. The problems confronting men and their children are far more diverse and serious than that.

I humbly submit the following:-

RECORDING OF SUICIDE STATISTICS IN N.S.W.

This is the province of Coroners and the State Coroner's Office. There is a very serious problem here. In more recent times the way suicide deaths are recorded has changed.

NOTE. In determining that a death is a suicide, a Coroner needs to record a positive finding. If a Coroner in N.S.W. is to so rule, the State Coroner directs local Coroners to put their reasons in writing.

The Coroner may record that it appears the person inflicted self-harm with the intent of suiciding, but this does not constitute a positive finding and is not recorded in ABS statistics.

In dispensing with an inquest, next of kin may never be certain of the victim's intention and some may never find closure, and for others it could be that they may not have agreed with a positive finding any way. This could be evidence of a state of denial.

On the other hand, it may be coronial reluctance in consideration of relatives' feelings that no finding of "suicide" is recorded.

Much of this ambiguity results from a coronial inquest being dispensed with. Suicide is the only form of violent death which does not require that an inquest be conducted. No positive finding is needed to be recorded. This appears to be an anomaly

With suicide, a person has died unnaturally (apart from euthanasia) there is a body, police attend, statements are taken, a brief is prepared for the Coroner, no open inquest is held and a ruling is made on the balance of probabilities and the death may be attributed to medical causes, i.e. – "hanging, drug overdose, carbon monoxide poisoning, multiple injuries and accidental death. With these findings no reference is made to self-inflicted or suicide death.

With no formal inquest the ruling is open to speculation, manipulation, and incorrect recording of a death. There is a need for action to change the present way this whole subject is handled if the true extent of this tragic loss of life is to be realised.

AT LEAST THREE MATTERS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED:-

- The re-introduction of formal and open inquests.
- An enquiry be made into the variance between the National Coroners' Information System (NCIS) and Australian Bureau of Statistics figures. **The ABS figures often show a reduced number of suicides. Why is this so?**
- The under-recording of suicide figures poses some serious problems:-
 - a. It can create the misconception that there is a reduction in the over-all total of annual suicides.

b. It can lead a false impression that there has been a reduction in a certain age group which may not now require the resources previously directed to it.

c. It could further persuade the Federal Dept. of Health and Ageing that even less funding over all is needed in their suicide prevention program.

Suicide and self-inflicted injury gives no indication of reduction in rural and remote areas but Mental Health Staff and resources are scarce and professional services can be up to hundreds of kilometres away. **Some areas have no such services. How best can this lack be rectified?**

SUICIDE DEATH.

The person who suicides becomes the most lonely person in the world in the moment before her/his death. It is a death like no other.

With a murder, at least there was someone there after the death there is someone to blame. With suicide there is no one really to blame because the option to suicide was the victim's own choice.

This is why close family members look to themselves to ask "What did I do? Was it me?" Children particularly can think they did something wrong. They will need specialist counselling, comfort and protection.

Both intervention and post-vention are absolutely essential if we are to properly address this national tragedy.

The compound pressure of living with all these problems can and is, in too many cases becoming intolerable, contributing to harmful activity causing physical damage and death.

FARMING FAMILIES.

When we speak of farming families we of course include grandparents, parents and children.

Many grandparents and even great grandparents, established the family farms which are now being run by their offspring who are to-day being confronted by times of economic down-turn never before experienced.

Some of the present families are being faced with the prospect of losing "on their watch" all that the preceding family members had worked so hard to establish.

Statistics are revealing that although the present farming communities are hard-working resilient professional operators, circumstances like the extended drought and economic recession the increasing imports of commodities and food which they have provided in the past, cannot compete with the volume and lower prices of these imports and low prices paid at the farmgate by greedy corporations.

The thought of losing everything that had been so hardy won for them, carries with it the sense of shame and failure which becomes too much for them to cope with and it can be with a misplaced sense of family honour that they take their own life.

Regrettably nothing is achieved for the remaining family members and it is too often that another member of the family takes similar action.

The suicide death of a parent always stands the chance of bringing with it lasting distress to the impressionable minds of children.

Again children who grow up with an unfounded sense of shame, loss, anger or fear which often robs them of the best part of their lives, which can end in tragedy.

COUNSELLING NEEDED -

- More male interviews in government agencies dealing with children and family issues.
- More male counsellors on telephone help-lines.
- Increased government funding for Men's Help-line, Dads-in-Distress, Life Line, Salvo's Help-line etc.
- Funding to recruit and train male phone counsellors for Life-Line
- More government funding for increase in male financial counsellors, health services, chaplains, marriage counsellors for the farming community.
- Government funding for relocation and rehabilitation packages for farmers forced off the land.
- Increase in grants not the impost of loans to farming business.
- Government policies aimed at making and keeping home-grown industries viable and alive.
- Is there something wrong with "protectionism" when it benefits our own national future?

All the foregoing has its long-term focus on the wellbeing of our nation's future – our children!

When government foster the importation of low-priced foreign produce and goods and then call certain local producers "unviable", they reveal their shameless hypocrisy.

Our government is in fact subsidising overseas producers at the expense of local producers who in many cases are unable to compete on this uneven playing field.

The Federal Government is handing out billions of dollars to so-called big business. **What do they call the "farming industry"?**

VETERANS ARE ALSO FARMERS.

The suicide deaths of farmers is alarmingly high (estimated to be one every four days, approximately 100 per year) and the suicides of children is even higher still. The veteran farming community is also represented in these statistics.

Veteran farmers, as well as those in business and industries in rural and remote districts and those in supportive townships, are seriously affected by the drought, reduced productivity and the inequities between the price paid to the producer at the farmgate and the price charged at the store check-out.

The prospect is that this veteran group is at a heightened risk of self-harm and suicide because of dealing with the trauma of war service and its aftermath and is still dealing with unresolved medical and mental health and financial problems to which they can see no end.

Farmers are industrious and resilient Australians, confused by changing government policy and treated as expendable by money-hungry big business actions and attitudes for which all Australia will have to pay a heavy price.

QUESTIONS:-

1. What inter-generational research is being conducted into the long-term economic, medical, sociological, physiological, and spiritual effects of the changing market economy,

2. What would the cost be individually and nationally in the relocation and rehabilitation of those forced from the land and out of their long-time employment, lifestyle and environment?
3. What will the cost be in the loss of life caused by the associated trauma and crisis related to these imposed changes which affect the dignity and historic long-term association with the land? (Statistics have recorded the already alarmingly high number of attempts and suicide deaths in this cohort.)
4. What evidence do we already have and what is effectively being done to address these and related issues?
5. What **positive changes** can we expect to see in government policy that reveals new initiatives, strategies and action which will reveal a new approach to this crisis?

THE WEATHER.

Long range prediction of Australia's weather indicates that the effect of climate change will deliver an increased temperature affecting rainfall and causing extended droughts and storm conditions and by association increase, financial indebtedness and affect the mental, physical and emotional wellbeing of the farming and primary production community?

If more farms and supportive industries go to the wall, more families and businesses will close and services will be withdrawn from these affected regions.

- How will government handle the crisis?
- How will the affected population survive?
- What will be the personal economic, social, physical, emotional and spiritual fall-out?
- How can these people handle relocation? What will that cost?
- Will the government offer retraining to the dislocated farming workforce?
- What affect is all this going to have on the children?
- With unemployment at its highest level for years, how does the government plan to see these "refugees" adequately catered for?

WHAT IS THE PRICE OF FURTHER INACTION?

Who pays the price for the -

- The shrinking farming community?
- The dwindling doctor numbers.
- Lack of psychiatric nurses?
- Shortage of mental health beds?
- Loss of medical and social services?
- The lack of generalist counselling services?
- Shortage of crisis, grief and trauma counsellors?
- Withdrawal of banks from small centres?
- Closure of small hospitals?
- The blow-out in hospital waiting lists?
- The long distances needing to be travelled to what were local services?
- Closure of small country primary schools?
- Loss of country air services?

The bottom line is – The price is paid by the "People of the Bush" as well as the cities - and particularly by the children?

FATHERS "AT RISK"

In the past 13 years on the Central Coast of N.S.W. I have had many fathers and clients who have either been referred to me or come of their own volition. Of these by far the greater

percentage were either contemplating self-harm, harming an ex-partner or kidnapping children.

THEIR REASONS:-

- Heartbreak at having children removed a great distance away - in many instances illegally.
- Frustration caused by paying for children they **cannot see**.
- No co-operation on visiting rights.
- Constantly changing visiting arrangements.
- Difficulties for both parents agreeing on change-over site.
- Having threats made by ex's new partner.
- Having AVO's taken out for no valid reason.
- Unjustified Family Law Court orders.
- Having lost the family home (sometimes even though they have worked hard to renovate etc.) and incurred other costs are living in sub-standard accommodation – but are still required to pay a mortgage and maintenance, even if not able to find work.
- Unable to afford good food.
- Developing debilitating illnesses.
- Experiencing periods of desperation and despair with the prospect of succumbing to depression.

DOCS.

It is reported that 90 children per week are taken from abusive environments by DOCS that equates to 4,690 per annum. (How many of these come from the farming community?)

QUESTIONS –

- What percentage was from single parent homes?
- What percentage from two parent homes?
- How many of these children had been the subject of a marriage breakdown and Family Law Court judgement?
- How many of these children had developed aggressive behaviour since such a judgement?
- How many had developed self-harming tendencies?
- How many took their lives?
- How many received appropriate counselling and/or psychiatric assessment or were prescribed medication to control behaviour?
- How many were returned to a family or parent of origin?
- Have there been any suicides from amongst this number?
- How many of these are seen to have benefitted from the intervention of the Department?

BEREAVEMENT RECOVERY WORKSHOPS.

For too long the importance of this vital therapy has been neglected to the detriment of those coming to terms with loss, grief or trauma.

- Area Health does provide some programs, individual counsellors and therapists and run programs, but none of these are widely accessible.
- Some churches provide “Divorce, Separation and Bereavement Recovery Workshops”.
- The State Coroner's Office runs a series of programs each year.
- Debrief and trauma services are provided within the emergency, fire, ambulance and police force.
- Some large industries also provide similar services or arrange access to such therapy.

- Government funding needs to be made available to regional and remote areas for these specific suicide grief and loss courses.

Many of these supportive services do not have specific suicide grief and trauma programs.

It is apparent that a more efficient networking structure is required to expedite an advanced form of service delivery to the public.

POSSIBLE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF UNADDRESSED SUICIDE GRIEF & LOSS -

Shock, denial, rejection, anger, fear, blame, stigma, shame, distrust, panic, distress, guilt, loneliness, lostness, withdrawal, isolation, regret, longings, suicidal ideation, suicidal behaviour, suicidal death.

For every suicide death it is reported up to 15 relatives and close friends are seriously affected - much greater if occurring in a school community.

With annual suicide rate of 1,800 up to 27,000 people can be seriously debilitated by not realising their need for counselling and supportive rehabilitation.

Again, farming families and their extended family members and close friends affected by a suicide death need to know that specialised counsel can greatly increase their ability to recover from the loss of a loved one.

A manual entitled "One Step at a Time" (a train the trainer course) is ideally suited to regional and remote communities. It is an eight session Recovery Workshop program which can be implemented by a self-trained facilitator. For information contact the email address below.

(Pastor) Eric J. Trezise.