

What Difference Does Writing Make?

Leading Writers on Writing

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Killing Aust. Slowly, Unheard

By Leonie Small

It takes more Australians every year than our roads, but you don't see multi-million dollar advertising campaigns or outraged Government ministers talking about the staggering suicide rate. Why? Maybe it's because people don't like talking about it. Maybe it's because suicide doesn't win votes. Either way, the national "tight-lip" stance hasn't made it disappear, and figures indicate it's not likely to any time soon. So it's time we stopped sugar coating and came up with a national scheme to bring this issue under control.

For a death to be considered suicide it must meet three criteria. First, the death must be from unnatural causes (i.e. suffocation or poisoning), not from illness. Second, the result of the death must have been self-inflicted, and third, it must have been done with the intent to die. Judging if these criteria have been met can be incredibly difficult, so coming to an accurate figure for the number of suicides in Australia is practically impossible.

This isn't helped when the suicide data compiled in Australia is subject to smokescreen tactics from Government spokespeople. The most recent data, for 2004–5, estimates that 2500 people die from suicide each year. This means roughly seven people suicide in Australia every day, but even more importantly, for every person who succeeds in killing themselves eight have attempted it. This rate places us in the highest third of Western nations,¹ but Australia's leaders have

¹ As compiled by the World Health Organization.

been promoting figures that suggest the national suicide rate is not a major concern; that levels have decreased overall and stabilised in rural areas.

In some respects this is true, but Michael Dudley, head of Suicide Prevention Australia, points out that the suicide rate is still much higher than in previous generations and that the current levels are more a return to former crisis levels than a reason for complacency. He also observes that while suicide rates have remained steady over the past few years in rural areas, it should be noted that the net number of people living in rural areas has decreased. Meaning the percentage rate of rural Australians resorting to suicide has increased alarmingly, but the politicians don't advertise that ...

Looking to the grave situation in Australia's rural areas, the main causes of suicidal episodes have been cited as economic downturn and stress. With many farmers struggling to keep financially afloat due to persistent drought and failed crops, many men and women who have prided themselves for generations in keeping the family farm running to support and raise their children have found themselves unable to cope.

This has been intensified by the lack of appropriate mental health and general health facilities available in outback Australia.

While nothing can be done about the drought, we can promote better coping strategies for stress and depression and help to create better mental-health facilities and networks in rural communities. This would allow easier identification of persons at risk and provide far more effective opportunities to help them get back on track.

Dr Simon Bridge, a Queensland GP, made an interesting argument last month in a radio interview. He pointed out that while today's school children learn about water and road safety, there are no lessons on mental safety and how to deal with suicidal thoughts. It may sound obscure, you may even laugh, but the truth of the matter is the majority of people who either attempt or succeed in committing suicide don't really want to die, they're just looking for a way to "ease the pain". He hopes to teach future generations to recognise depressive thoughts

before they reach suicidal levels and promote “buddy system” strategies for when suicidal thoughts are occurring. This proactive approach aims to save many young Australians from committing suicide until they can obtain the professional help they need.

A more reactive system has been promoted in the Howard Government’s 2006 Budget. In this year’s budget Suicide Prevention will receive \$62.4 million over the next five years to create more places for suicidal patients in public hospitals and train more mental- health nurses across Australia. This sounds reasonable, but if you look at it in relation to the \$800 million to be spent on the NSW Hume Highway alone and the \$268 million allocated to the Bruce Highway in Queensland, it’s an outrage. If individual roads can get roughly 12 times the funding of an entire sector of Australia’s National Mental Health System there is a serious problem with our Government’s priorities. And it’s those Australians and their families suffering suicidal thoughts and depression that are paying the ultimate price. Daily.

One of the more public suicide attempts from 2005 was by former Opposition leader John Brogden. Mr. Brogden resorted to suicide in an attempt to escape the media humiliation over a comment about Bob Carr’s wife being a “mail-order” bride. With this suicide attempt hitting so close to home for Australia’s politicians, it gave them and the media the perfect opportunity to bring some constructive attention to this issue, potentially helping many Australians whom may have been considering the same actions. But what did they do? Members of the Government leaked John Brogden’s suicide note to the State Parliament and the media in general, turning the event into a sensationalised media circus.

Suicide has a devastating impact on all parties involved. Most families left behind ask the eternal question: “What could I have done to stop this?” The tragedy is, some people will slip through the cracks no matter what you try, but to reach those who can be saved our governments and politicians need to get behind Suicide Prevention via advertising campaigns and education programs. Because if we can get

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people talking about the tough issues hopefully they will be better equipped to deal with depression and suicidal thoughts. Even more importantly, they'll be able to recognise friends, family or colleagues at risk and help them to find the institutes and organisations that can help them through the tough times. It pays to remember that we're never alone in life, no matter what it may seem.



Leonie Small wrote this essay in 2006 when she was in Year 11 at Coffs Harbour Senior College, Coffs Harbour, New South Wales.