

**Submission
No 40**

PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially
Confidential

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

So, what do we have to say about what's happened [REDACTED], what's happened to our family, his friends, his local [REDACTED] community, [REDACTED], the health professionals who tried to help, the traumatised police and emergency services, to our friends and family interstate and overseas, even to people who didn't even know him but have somehow been affected by what has happened to him? Or even for those who think only in terms of numbers – what is the cost of such a tragedy, the collateral damage?

[REDACTED]

How great is the ripple effect, seen and unseen – the impact of something like this happening to a young person with so much potential, in his prime, loved by so many? What a cruel waste of potential. How can we endeavour to stop tragedies like this occurring?

[REDACTED]

Why was he ultimately overpowered by the depression?

[REDACTED] we battled along with him for 10 months to try to help him.

[REDACTED] We tried to hold and help him, with our limited knowledge and resources, sought the help of the professionals. We thought he was getting better. Were we too optimistic? Too slow to join the dots, too narrow minded - certainly too inexperienced, uneducated and naïve about mental health. Unfortunately he largely masked his troubles.

[REDACTED] While unwell with depression he could not fulfil his own very high expectations; he 'could not do it and live'. Our next strategy would have been to encourage him to give up school, for him to just concentrate on dealing with this illness which appeared to come back with a vengeance with the new school year. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

How can families have a better capacity to cope and support their child through something like this, to better understand and adapt to such a dynamic and confronting situation? With any other life-threatening illness there would likely be a team overseeing the problem – it would not be largely left to the parents to sink or swim.

█ seems to be a canary in the coalmine. How do we better combat what seems to be an epidemic of emotional health issues, to stop damaging, █ precious lives? █

█ Now that we have been exposed to this situation we realise that it is a huge and complex problem - woefully under-resourced and pitifully understood.

█ thinking about big questions, career options, perhaps overanalysing and taking on the woes of the world. Was he encouraged to return to the rigid school system when he should have just taken time out to recover? Are we loading our primary children and teenagers with too much worry?

With the dog-eat-dog mentality that we seem to be encouraging or enabling as a society, we are putting huge pressure on individuals, families and children. The school system seems to be concentrating on churning out scores, pitting kids in competition rather than focusing on learning for your life. The concept of child 'wellbeing' is being bandied around the schools, but it's a farce and all too late when the student has been surrounded and absorbing angst over homework, selective schools and extension classes from early primary school - even perhaps from pre-school with 'portfolio-viewing' and 'graduation ceremonies'. Our apparently 'wealthy' area has such a high proportion of parents in housing/mortgage stress, fearful of the economic future for their children and passing this fear on to their kids. Children whose natures are perhaps better suited to compete or who perhaps care less, may take things in their stride. But what are we saying to our more sensitive, creative souls that need to time and space to develop more slowly or quietly? Is that what we want - survival of the fittest in an arbitrary narrowly-framed race? Isn't the take now that we will need creative minds to cope with this time of rapid change?

█ why could we not pick up any clues earlier, find a solution or diversion, somehow avoid this outcome?

We do not want █ to become a mere statistic. He was and is still teaching and helping others with their own issues and hardships. Something should be learnt from his individual experience – a microcosm can perhaps teach more than statistics. We would like to direct our fierce parenting energies to try to help others in similar situations and to share some of our experience.

Questions/suggestions/thoughts:

OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM:

- **Children should never be put in an adult Mental Health Ward.** [redacted] only night at [redacted] hospital was a confronting experience – [redacted] being assessed close to midnight and encouraged to self-admit, and ending up alone in a locked room with no window. We all had second thoughts then - there was no option for a parent to stay with him overnight. This is completely counter to parental instinct. [redacted]
[redacted] All of this may have deterred him from seeking further help down the track.
- [redacted] we were desperately searching for a psychologist/counsellor or that our son felt comfortable speaking to [redacted] We were then forced to choose between the public [redacted] and the so-called private systems [redacted]. We felt **abandoned by the public system** and any financial support this provided. It seemed that this was to cover the tail of the professionals, and not in our interest or in the interest of our child who had been identified as suicidal.
- This is a very complex area for inexperienced parents to try to fathom. This is especially the case when they suddenly and unexpectedly find themselves under such immense stress, where time is crucial, and it is all potentially a question of life or death. Each wasted trip could unnecessarily deplete limited energy or be a fatal error.
- The referral system through the GP is too ungainly and time consuming. Since it is so tricky to find a fit with a therapist there should be some sort of **voucher system** for people to choose which health professional best suits their child. Also it seems that many of the therapists, [redacted], are not covered by the Medicare system – we therefore had to incur all of these costs ourselves.
- Early detection/awareness may save lives – there could be a sort of **pre-puberty health check** like we do at birth or 50. Can early indicators such as childhood anxiety, melancholy or perfectionism be picked up early on before things like Depression kick in?
- Brief all parents of primary, pre-teen & teenagers of potential warning signs (Parents need to be pre-warned of the 1 in 5 probability of emotional health illness developing) – we had no idea of the risks or what Depression could be or lead to. 'Depression' is such an inaccurate descriptor – ranging from 'a bit depressed/down to actually suicidal'.
- Teach kids to care for their emotional health, how to balance their emotions – do we care for our kids or just about their marks? Obsession with giving homework at primary school is impacting on kid's home life.
- We have public health programs and immunisation against diseases. What is the relative likelihood of developing depression or other emotional health illness? How about promoting greater public awareness of the impact of puberty hormones and lifestyle risks, sleep patterns, drugs and alcohol on the developing brain, as well as programs for suicide prevention?
- Families in critical situations need more help to support their child, like the Maternal Health Nurses, support groups, follow up appointments - some sort of safety net/ overlay check in the system. Currently they are left to flounder while trying to keep working, pay the bills,

and look after other siblings. We were lucky enough to have one parent able to stay at home – many families would not have that option. Parents also need counselling in order to best support and monitor their child. Over time parents probably have the tendency to be overly optimistic, to be focussed on supporting and encouraging the child, and potentially too close to recognise danger signs. They need to be warned that depression can come back or spike back with a vengeance.

RESEARCH

- Obviously much more research is required into child and teen mental health – basically it seems very little is known and the current treatment is a mere **band-aid** – we seem to know very little, especially when it comes to young people.
- [REDACTED] no idea if the prescribed drug LOVAN was having any effect; or if it even made his condition worse.
- **More FUNDING.** Given the apparent scale of the problem with Youth Emotional Health (anxiety, depression, self-harm, bulimia, anorexia....) how much funding is going into this area compared to the more obvious physical illnesses such as cancer, heart disease etc?

ONGOING SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES/CARERS

- Education – parents need to be briefed in a quick and informative way. If it is a crisis situation they may be in shock and not able to absorb the initial information.
- The only readily useful information we found was an American leaflet... Erika's Lighthouse on Child & Teen Depression
- Services that teenagers might actually use? Teenagers are seeking help from their peers or reading whatever they find on the internet, which may or may not be appropriate. We never thought to ring Lifeline; [REDACTED]
- Follow up (to check parents are not being complacent, deluded, too optimistic)
- Families are in the front-line and therefore perhaps too close to recognise the warning signs - if there are warning signs.
- Parents are meanwhile trying to keep themselves together – manage the finances, their own health, lessen the impact on siblings – danger of burn out and missing signals.
- Families dealing with an emotional health problem basically have a disabled child but very little recognition or support. Generally it is treated in a secretive way to avoid long-term stigma, however this also promotes isolation.
- When to push/ when to pull back? When to encourage structure/ go with the flow? When should the child just opt out of the system and try to recover at home. The idea of tackling year 11 & 12 while dealing with his depression became an insurmountable pressure [REDACTED] The schools lean toward the stance of structure and in a way have a conflict of interest as the system is so driven by academic performance and competition. If we had had more time we would have encouraged [REDACTED] to take another path, to have reinforced that life is not an all-or-nothing race.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

- Everyone needs to BACK OFF & Let kids be kids
- Why the rush; why are we treating kids like mini-adults, projects?
- Let home-time be home time
- Learn through play & less time-wasting work sheets



- Stop the obsession with measurement and over-reporting! Let the teachers teach and encourage a love of learning.
- Rather than trying to cram children full of information they need skills for the modern world that are often more about limiting and sifting through information; teaching them to recognise what they like, what interests them, what is good for them
- Get rid of Naplan (it is being abused by schools, pushy parents & is promoting competition/angst). It is used as a measurement tool for entry to the private schools to help with maintaining the measurements for their future HSC results and for marketing the schools. The money and time dedicated to measurement should be diverted to a budget for a comprehensive Child Emotional Health program.
- Back off with the homework (it seems to be mostly driven by worried parents and is often reluctantly taken up by teachers)
- Selective tests, Extension Class tests, Gifted & Talented are not necessarily in the interests of the children and their emotional health. Labelling children at such an early age, when they all develop differently would be in many cases counter-productive.
- Life is not a race
- The kids who need to take their time, the deep thinkers, the dreamers, also have value to society. There seems to be an obsession with speed, quick shallow answers, turn over. Adult concepts – what happened to the concept of slow time in childhood? Now stressed parents are busy running children from one activity to another. Technology is filling in any gaps of time to dream or just be.
- Early identification of a tendency to anxiety or perfectionism; identify ways to diffuse anxious thinking not fuel it?
- Tools for kids to balance their emotional health, life-skills to be able to cope and adapt in a time of rapid change.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

- We are effectively told to trust, to hand our kids over, that they will come back to us once they have gone through the teenage years
- [REDACTED] weather-beaten, depressed
- These critical years need much more attention to psychological wellbeing, and if anything more parental and community attention. [REDACTED] a social boy, popular and sporty – all things that are supposed to fortify a kid emotionally.
- Just because a child is clever does not mean they are emotionally ready to be fast-tracked into extension classes.
- Impact of social media and addictive games... it seems to be a world of constant vigilance by peers, without privacy, bombardment of information and communication – possibly interfering with sleep patterns. Parents are fighting a losing battle of trying to limit access to electronic devices.
- How much school time is actually wasted by trying to use computers in class? The use of the hand is linked to brain development – are we creating imbalance?
- Schools are under-resourced for the scale of the problem (1 in 4 or 5 with emotional health issues?)
- Too much hype over year 11 & 12, extension classes, strict pre-requisites for so many Uni courses; obsession with maths
- In the past many kids would have left school by their late teens. The academic path is often seen as the be-all-and-end-all.

- Too much pressure on kids while they are going through puberty. The latest version of linking the ability to do HSC with minimum Naplan levels is just ludicrous and already inciting angst among parents and students. What is the purpose of Education? Is it in the interests of the children or to create robots for society... aren't many of the jobs going to be taken by robots?... we need creative and lateral thinkers.

GOVERNMENT LEVEL

- Obviously Emotional Health is a completely under-resourced and neglected area
- [REDACTED] a member of the [REDACTED] Life-Saving Club. At 15 he was presented his Bronze Medal [REDACTED]; he took his own life less than a year later
- Families in crisis need to be better informed and supported.
- If its money that talks it's a false economy not to invest in emotional health, suicide prevention and take a critical look at what government policies are detrimentally impacting on other portfolios.
- How many thousands of people are touched by one casualty? Lost work hours? How many extra people are accessing the health system due the shock of [REDACTED] years of lost income.
- Government policy needs to consider the potential impact on the Emotional Health of society not just number-crunching. Government has encouraged or at least allowed, Housing unaffordability and speculation to run amok. Mortgage/rental stress is putting pressure on families and this is inadvertently flowing on to children. A Planning problem is a Public Health problem and should not just be considered a separate department. The concept of 'home' seems to have been replaced with property speculation – community is lost when house prices rise; only the banks and real estate agents benefit – we are effectively being stripped of our assets, our time with our kids, indentured.
- Government support is required for community and school pilot programs.

CITY/COUNCIL LEVEL

- Council's Vision for 2028? Focus on the Youth – [REDACTED] Ask the kids what they want, what is relevant to them. Don't be surprised if we don't like what they say.
- Mega Councils need to ensure that the sense of Community is not lost through amalgamation. Human scale is essential for a sense of community.
- Housing unaffordability – the impact of the trend to see housing not as a 'home' but as an speculative property
- How can we encourage the appreciation of the energy and excitement teenagers?
- Boy to Man; Girl to Woman... sort of safe initiation, more meaningful community events
- Teenagers have very little in the way of public places to gather, outlets for their energy are limited.
- Parents are fearful of having parties or gatherings in their own backyards so kids are sneaking out during the night and doing dangerous things - parents largely unaware that there might be nocturnal roaming/gathering. Kids have the technology to plan elaborate escapades.

ORGANISATIONS

- There seem to be many organisations trying to provide support, but not necessarily specifically for teenagers
- There may be many sources of information but nothing easily accessed in the heat of the moment. Parents in crisis need quick timely advice (to be briefed rather than have to wade through literature themselves)
- Existing sporting and social clubs could promote better awareness and recognition of Emotional Health. Our local community is a very supportive and the Surf Life Saving Club has recently run the Lifeline Accidental Councillor course.
- The trouble is the people that most need it may not yet be aware. It is often kids that you least suspect that are in trouble. We need to look out for all the kids in our community.

EMERGENCY & HOSPITAL SERVICES

- In an emergency situation what is the procedure for parents of a child who is suicidal?
- Why can't a parent stay overnight with a child in hospital?
- Are there beds for children in child-only wards? If not, why not?
- Are the facilities designed to minimise the fear involved with being in that situation?
- Are the facilities designed just to address immediate suicide risk? Could the experience inadvertently leave a negative effect and long term consequences?
- What is the effect of being locked alone in a windowless room on a child?
- Will the new hospital at [REDACTED] have an Emotional Health Facility? Will it be better designed for the needs of a child?
- What are the follow up services? Why does [REDACTED] seem so underfunded?

The support we have had from the community has been overwhelming. A side effect of this public grieving and opening up is that we have become aware of the many other children and families also suffering in silence. There is obviously a tremendous need and a growing momentum for better understanding, support and prevention programs for child and adolescent emotional health.

As one other parent commented, 'It could have been any of us'.

