Washing the blood of the rails
Suicide prevention by the railway industry

> So, this is my final day. I've come here to throw myself to my death … So I went to the railway station, but there were too many people waiting on the platform.
>
> Rosalie Ham, There Should Be More Dancing

Each year a hundred and fifty people suicide by placing themselves in the path of a train, and a thousand engage in reckless behaviour with half being seriously injured. This is tragic for the miserable souls concern, their families and the train crews involved. The railway industry through founding the trackSafe Association in 2012 has undertaken to reduce this human toll. TrackSafe has representation by all major rail authorities, private operators and industry; including METRO, Rio Tinto and the Rail, Tram Bus Union. Deputy Prime Minister under the Howard Government and rail enthusiast Tim Fischer has lent his name and energy as the patron of trackSafe. With the 6th largest railway network in the World and 46,000 km of track, reducing suicides would appear a formidable task.

Incidents of suicide

Suicide is a major external cause of death in Australia, accounting for more deaths than transport incidents; with 2,100 deaths last year. However, suicide rates for both males and females have significantly decreased since the mid-90s. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics, for men this saw a reduction from 24 per 100,000 people in 1996 to 14 per 100,000 in 2008, or about 2,000 fewer deaths. And despite the common belief that there is a *youth suicide epidemic*, suicide rates among the age group 15-19 years is half that of older age groups. The highest risk being for men over 65 years.

How was this improvement brought about? In the 1980s large asylums were being closed and community based services developed. This corresponded with increasing advocacy from families, health and welfare professions and mentally ill themselves. There was also a series of public enquires; eg, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1987), The Burdekin Report into Mental Illness (1993), and the National Action Plan on Mental Health (2006)

Improvement over this period included:

- Better pharmlogical treatment of mental illness.
- Development of community-based medical and social support services.
- Training of teachers, community workers and Police in how to respond to mental illness.
- Reduction of means; eg, tighter laws about firearms, removing hanging points in jails.
- Diversion of young men from prison; especially Aboriginals.

Location

One geographical feature in Melbourne, the WestGate Bridge accounted for 1 in 20 suicides in Victoria (over 700 since its construction). The phrase "going over the Westgate" became a

euphemism for suicide. For many years, bridge authorities wrestled with how to respond. Wouldn't desperate folk scale any fencing or use some other high point; or worse might highlighting the matter only drive other hapless folk to suicide? Newspaper reports refrain from using the word suicide out of the same concern; instead using the coded phrase "no suspicious circumstances."

However, five years ago, after a detailed coronial review and considering evidence from overseas, a substantive barrier was included as part of a major upgrade of the Bridge. The incidence of suicides practically disappeared and there was no corresponding increase elsewhere. It seems counter-intuitive that a specific location can have such a powerful effect on so many disparate individuals.

A personal tale

As a child our back-fence abutted a railway line. My own father had worked in Railway's Overhead Branch, latter as a trainer and even staff representative on the State Transport Authority Board. He also experienced severe mental ill-health; as had many in our family linage. His health deteriorated later in his life and he suicided by steeping into the path of a train. My mother could never forgive him for the pain it would have inflicted on the train driver.

Later I wondered why my father had chosen a particular pedestrian crossing. The railwayline was just over the back fence and a railway station not far away in the opposite direction. But the particular pedestrian crossing was notorious for suicides. The reason was obvious; it was the closest access to the nearby   and   psychiatric hospitals which had accommodated hundreds of involuntary patients. The hospitals had originally been built due to access to railway and even had their own branch-line at one stage. The area was also not too busy so less likely anyone would intervene. For similar reasons we use to play around this spot a children – stupidity in hindsight. It does seem that certain places and circumstances contribute to suicides.

Prevention measures

Sydney's Central Railway Station has twenty-five platforms and tens of thousands of commuters flow through each hour. How can station staff detect anyone who might be experiencing suicidal ideation (thoughts of suicide) amongst this teaming mass? Well they can and do. Humans are very good at patterns. Watch a crowd alighting from a train. Within a moment they are all walking in step. Station staff are trained to look for people who stand out, and to go with their instincts about what might be unusual. For example, someone standing near the edge or back of the crowd, remaining while a number of trains has past, their dress, speech, mannerisms. They can then approach and ask after the person. It most likely they will be a traveller unfamiliar with the time-table, waiting on friends, etc. However, this approach is a powerful invitation for a distress person to say "they are not OK." Two-thirds of those experiencing suicide ideation tell a health care professional and often show a change in behaviour. There is a trend to putting people back on stations. The presence of station and security staff should both enable crisis intervention and dissuade people from take that last desperate act.

Technology

In the 1980s, the railways in Victoria removed wire fencing from along suburban lines. Fences were a legacy of keeping away livestock. However, people including children could readily press through such barriers if they perceived a short-cut. A twist to the problem was that where fences became dilapidated there might be a legal liability should someone subsequently be harmed on the line. The Railways opted to tear out the fences as hazardous roadways were not fenced and road authorities not held libel. Signage and education was considered adequate warning of trespass and danger. We might well consider reinventing fencing via Information technology to monitor critical locations and alert staff to investigate. It is likely that loud broadcast to stand clear of the track would distract someone long enough for help to arrive.

Dumb Ways To Die

Victoria's METRO's Dumb Ways to Die campaign has gained recognition for it's success in conveying a safety message. The charming jingle with cute eggheads has spread across social media such Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, with musicians around the globe covering (repeating) the lyrics. School kids have been noted chanting to lines at mates' risk taking antics around trains. One theory is that why youth tend not to focus of their own mortality; which is why graphic pictures of road trauma seem to have limited effect. But they are image conscious and don't want to be seen as dumb! Sexual-selection is a greater motivator than survival; this is why male lyre birds have such ornate but otherwise useless tails. It is too early to tell if the *Dumb Ways to Die* campaign has any longer term impact on risk taking behaviour. It is also more likely that a prolifera of measures are required. Eg, consultation with railways staff and the community, fencing, technological innovations, law enforcement, observation and monitoring, community-based care, Ambulance and medical responses, and media and community education. trackSafe is on track to greatly reduce the blood on the tracks.