



ACT Children & Young People Death Review Committee

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National Children's Commissioner examines intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children

Call for Submissions: 22 April 2014

The ACT Children and Young People Death Review Committee (the Committee) is committed to reducing the number of preventable child and young person deaths that occur in the ACT.

Barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help

The Committee would like to highlight three barriers which prevent children and young people seeking help, namely:

1) Some adults view intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children as shameful

The Committee is of the opinion that a significant barrier to children and young people seeking help may be the attitudes of society, and the community as a whole. There still appears to be a stigma associated with intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviours which may result in children and young people not seeking assistance.

2) Change to counselling support once a young person turns 18 years of age

The Committee is aware that young people may often be required to change their counselling support once they reach 18 years of age to coincide with the change from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service's Adolescent Team to its Young Adult Team or even to the Adult Mental Health Service. It is the experience of the Committee that this may often lead to the young person disengaging with Mental Health Services and therefore, losing the support of counselling at a time in their life when there is already a significant amount of change.

3) Absence of the views of children on the topic of self-harm and suicidal behaviour

The Committee believes children and young people need to be spoken to about all aspects of self-harm and suicide, including barriers to seeking assistance. Many of the barriers to seeking assistance identified by adults may not necessarily be what children and young people identify as barriers. The Committee encourages the National Children's Commissioner to explore possible ways that children and young people who have been affected by intentional self-harm and suicide can contribute to this examination.

The Committee is aware there are other barriers which prevent children and young people from seeking help and does not wish to minimise the importance of these other barriers also being addressed by the National Children's Commissioner.

The impediments to the accurate identification and recording of intentional self-harm and suicide in children and young people, the consequences for this, and suggestions for reform.

The Committee believes that one of the major impediments to the accurate identification of suicidal behaviours in children and young people is the quality and accuracy of the death certificates being completed by the Doctors involved in the child or young person's death. It appears there are instances when death certificates do not accurately identify suicide as the cause of death for a variety of numbers, including but not limited to:

- not wishing to upset surviving family members by labelling the death as a suicide given the stigma associated with this cause of death
- relatively inexperienced Doctors being responsible for completing the death certificate
- Doctors not taking enough time to complete the death certificate accurately and in enough detail.

One consequence of inaccurate death certificates is deaths as a result of suicide being significantly underreported across Australia. This has far reaching consequences in the area of prevention and postvention because:

- researchers are unable to identify trends and patterns in suicidal behaviours in children, including contributing factors
- child death committees are unable to identify areas requiring further research in the area of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children
- recommendations about legislation, policies, practices and services for implementation by government and non-government bodies are not being supported by accurate data and therefore, may not be assessed as an issue that requires focus and/or change.

The Committee makes the following suggestions for reform to address this issue:

- better training of medical students at University so they obtain an understanding of the importance of accurately completing death certificates
- changes made to the questions required to be completed on death certificate forms so that Doctors are required to provide more detailed and accurate information
- removing the stigma of suicide as a cause of death so that Doctor's feel comfortable in recording this as a cause of death.

The Committee would also like to take this opportunity to highlight the need for more work in relation to data collection in the area of intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children. The Committee encourages the development of other data sources to assist in the understanding of intentional self-harm and suicide in children with the aim of identifying potential points of intervention and postvention.