

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Take opportunity now to prevent indigenous suicide

PAT DUDGEON THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 09, 2015 1:19PM

**There are rare moments when governments have an opportunity to work together and take bold actions that will save lives. Right now, there is a chance to do just that through a new, national approach to indigenous suicide prevention.**

Mental health conditions, self-harm and suicide are reported among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at more than double the rate of other Australians. The situation has not improved in recent years. In fact, it may be getting worse.

There were approximately 100 indigenous deaths by suicide each year between 2001 and 2010. In 2012, 117 suicides were reported.

Deaths by suicide form a veil of sadness that sits terribly heavily on our people and is a source of deep national shame for all Australians.

*The statistics are bad enough. But take a moment to imagine the individual lives lost and the deep and reverberating impact each suicide has on families and communities.*

We are slowly making some progress in our approach to suicide prevention, mental health and social and emotional wellbeing more generally. It is now generally acknowledged, for example, that the health and mental health systems have to respect and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and acknowledge cultural differences.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have a holistic understanding of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. Within this are concepts of the cultural importance of the connection between the mind and body as well as the land, ancestors and other spiritual connections. Given this, indigenous leadership is needed to ensure culturally-informed practices and methods are available, as well to clinical responses.

Programs such as the *National Empowerment Project*, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders suicide prevention project working with eleven Aboriginal communities across the country, are exploring new and promising paths. But right now that Project is only working with eleven communities. We need to reach all communities and offer not only this program, but a range of different service programs and supports. These need to be led by locally led and culturally appropriate programs, working in genuine partnership with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. That is why we need a dedicated Indigenous Mental Health Action Plan.

In our *Contributing Lives, Thriving Communities Report*, the National Mental Health Commission sets out clear recommendations to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health. These include establishing mental health and social and emotional wellbeing teams in Indigenous Primary Health Care Organisations that are linked to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specialist mental health services.

These teams would be invaluable in implementing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders mental health plan. Right now, the government has an opportunity to pull all of these threads together. For it is not only considering the NMHC review but also commencing the development of a new national mental health plan, and is about to implement the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and the 2013 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy.

As this list shows, we have had many committees, inquiries, reviews and strategies. What is urgent and is needed now is implementation of action to prevent suicides and suicide attempts, and promote good mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

The NMHC also supports extending the Closing the Gap targets to include suicide prevention. We urge COAG to commit to reducing the gap in the rate of suicide and suicide attempts within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community by 20 per cent by 2020 and 50 per cent by 2025 and 100 per cent by 2031.

Why do we need targets? Because it helps us focus on outcomes, not on services per se, which is where we have fallen down in the past. And because what gets measured has more chance of getting done.

We have to act now to save our children. Suicide is the leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 15 and 35.

Around 18,300 Australian babies identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander will be born this year. If we reached that 2031 target and eliminated the gap in the suicide rate, more of those children would live to celebrate their 16th birthday and many more birthdays after that.

Imagine the difference that would make to so many families and communities. That's why I urge governments to seize this chance and act now.

Professor Pat Dudgeon is a National Mental Health Commissioner.