

Summit targets suicide

By MEZ FISHER



PUTTING Indigenous people in charge of their own affairs and creating strong connections with culture are the prime ingredients for making happy, healthy communities that can protect young people from taking their own lives, a recent roundtable summit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide heard.

The Perth summit, held last month at the Nedlands Yacht Club, also saw the launch of a new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group in Mental Health, said to signal a new era in Indigenous leadership in the areas of mental health and suicide prevention.

Professor Pat Dudgeon, from the University of Western Australia's School of Indigenous Studies and Australia's first Aboriginal psychologist, hailed the roundtable as an "absolute success" in bringing together people from all walks of life to tackle the alarming rate of Indigenous suicide – twice the rate of other Australians and among younger age groups up to six times higher.

Prof Dudgeon said the summit heard from a mix of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous: community members, grassroots campaigners including several contributors to the recent Elders Report on youth suicide, academics, policy makers, mental health professionals and government representatives.

A pivotal point of the summit was an address by Canadian academic Michael Chandler, a noted expert in suicide prevention among Canadian First Nations communities. His research points to a sense of "cultural continuity" as a key protective factor against a community's risk for suicide.

"The Canadian experience has done a lot of research with colleagues to show communities with low suicide rates have a whole bunch of factors," Prof Dudgeon said.

"They call it cultural continuity but if we translate it to the Australian context it's about self-determination, or preserving cultural activities."

Other factors identified by Prof Chandler's research include communities that have achieved a measure of self-government; been quick off the mark to pursue Aboriginal title to traditional lands; promoted women to leadership roles; constructed facilities that preserve their culture; and worked to gain control over their own civic lives, including health, education, policing,

and child welfare services.

The WA roundtable was Prof Chandler's 'third conversation' with his Australian counterparts since 2010 – hence its title, 'The Third Conversation: Has Anything Changed?'

When asked by the *Koori Mail* if anything had changed, Prof Dudgeon said things had changed "a little bit, with a lot of action happening in the community and Indigenous people gaining more of a voice".

She said it was important that the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide prevention strategy be reactive to the roundtable's outcomes, which will be presented to government in coming weeks.

"I think that ministers will be really keen to see what the outcomes of the roundtable are. They are keen to hear and get concrete ways forward," Prof Dudgeon said.

"Governments – whether state or federal – want to do something; they do want to do something but they're not sure how to go about it."

In some communities, suicide clusters involving up to 20-plus deaths in a short timeframe had devastated those left behind, Prof Dudgeon said.

She said good case management was needed following a suicide to prevent more such tragedies. She said she believed clusters occurred because of grieving and loss in the community.

She also points to broader concerns about identifying what is wrong with society itself.

"Chandler says suicide is the miner's canary," Prof Dudgeon said.

"So we have high rates of suicide, which in itself is a terrible and tragic thing, but what are the reasons?"

On the last day of the summit, Prof Dudgeon launched the new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership Group in Mental Health, endorsed by NSW Mental Health Commissioner John Feneley and Western Australian Mental Health Commissioner Timothy Marney.

The body has coalesced around a core group of senior Indigenous people working in the areas of social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and suicide prevention.

Many of the group's representatives are involved with the state and national mental health commissions and other leading Indigenous health organisations.

● If you would like to speak with someone about suicide, call the 24-hour Lifeline crisis service on 131 114 or the Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467.



Professor Pat Dudgeon



Segar Passi at work on Mer (Murray Island) in the Torres Strait. Photo by Lee Wilkes

Top Mer artist's work on show



WORKS by senior Torres Strait artist Segar Passi are now on show at the Cairns Regional Gallery.

Passi, who lives and works on Mer (Murray Island), has been painting

and drawing the flora and fauna of his island home, and subjects that tell of island life and the cultural traditions of the Meriam people, for more than 60 years.

His new exhibition, *Segar Passi: Bakei – 1960s to the Present*, features 36 of his paintings, produced between 1968 and 2014.

The earliest works on show highlight Passi's talent as a young artist.

In the late 1960s, still in his 20s, he made a huge contribution to a landmark cultural project. Margaret Lawrie, a teacher who had become an advocate for Torres Strait culture, worked with Torres Strait Islanders from 1964-1973 to assemble a substantial record of their stories, histories, languages, traditions and way of life. A number of Torres Strait artists participated in Lawrie's project,

among them Segar Passi.

The body of work that Passi created for the Lawrie project consisted mainly of watercolour studies of fish and birds. Several of these fragile and rarely exhibited watercolours have been borrowed from the John Oxley Library at the State Library of Queensland for inclusion in *Segar Passi: Bakei*.

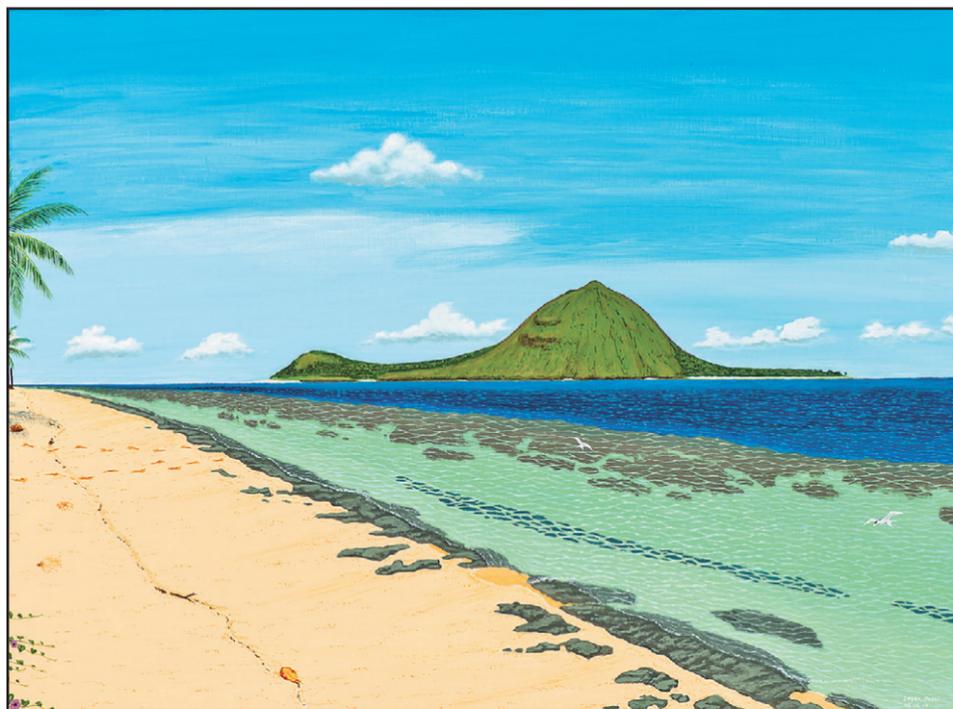
Over the decades, Passi's visual style has changed dramatically. Today, the artist paints mainly in acrylics, and his compositions are distinctive for their strong colours.

Cloud formations

His recent works include paintings themed around cloud formations. Clouds are a significant source of knowledge for Torres Strait Islanders, and interpreting cloud patterns is an important part of daily life in the Torres Strait.

The exhibition will be officially launched on July 26 by chief executive Tom Mosby. It continues until September 21.

More details at www.cairnsregionalgallery.com.au



One of Segar Passi's works, *Dauar*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, on display at the Cairns Regional Gallery. It was a gift of the Blair Family in memory of Heather Blair.