

Suicide Statistics

Statement by *beyondblue* CEO

Leonie Young (26 Feb 2007)

Recently, there has been some discussion about suicide statistics in relation to Australian farmers.

The most recent figures show that in Australia, approximately one male farmer dies from suicide every four days (Page A, Fragar 'Suicide in Australian *Farming*' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2002). *beyondblue* referred to this research on 28 June 2006 when we launched the *beyondblue* information line 1300 22 4636 and our rural advertising campaign to raise awareness of depression in rural areas.

We acknowledge that these statistics are several years old, but they are substantiated and there are no more recent statistics available specially relating to farmers.

We are an independent, evidence-based organisation and don't use "scare" tactics or unsubstantiated research. If there were more recent statistics available pertaining specifically to farmers, we would use them.

Getting accurate suicide statistics isn't straightforward. The most recent suicide statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show that 2, 098 people in Australia died from suicide in 2004 (5.7 people a day) compared to 2, 720 in 1997 (7.5 people a day)¹.

However, in a letter published in the *Medical Journal of Australia* on 5 February 2007², Professor Diego De Leo, Director and Professor of Psychiatry at the Australian Institute of Suicide Research and Prevention at Griffith University in Brisbane, reveals that the suicide statistics provided by the ABC actually **under-report** the real number of suicides, based on evidence his team has collected for the Queensland Suicide Register.

"In 2004, there were 580 cases of suicide in Queensland and not 453, as reported by the Bureau of Statistics... These data alone reverse the delving trend for suicide mortality nationally in the most recent years," Professor De Leo said.

Professor De Leo says the reason for this discrepancy is the "large backlog of cases still under investigation by coroners... and those that end with an open verdict [which] would not enter official suicide mortality data, as they are never reconciled."

Other contributing factors suggested by Professor De Leo for under-reporting of suicide include "misclassification as accident, road accident, or disease-related, particularly in the elderly; cover up because of stigma, sociocultural norms, or insurance reasons; or the remoteness of location."³

Regardless of whether official suicide figures in Australia are increasing or decreasing, one thing is clear.

¹ Information adapted from the full resource *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness, C/W of Aust.* (2002) and Australian Bureau of Statistics – Suicides 1994 – 2004, Catalogue Number 3309 (2006):

- In 2004, 1, 1661 males (16.8 per 100, 000) and 437 females (4.3 per 100, 000) died by suicide – a total of 2, 098 deaths (10.4 per 100, 000)
- Australia's young (15-24) male suicide rate is fourth highest among Western Countries.
- Rates for men ages 30-34 years are currently the highest for all male age groups, followed by men aged 40-44 years.
- Australia has a similar rate of suicide to that of the USA and Canada. The rate is higher than in the UK, but lower than in New Zealand.

² (*MJA* 2007; 186 (3): 157-158)

Suicide still accounts for too many deaths in Australia. One death from suicide per year is too many. Nearly six people taking their own lives every day is unacceptable.

Suicide and depression don't necessarily go hand in hand. Thankfully, only a very small percentage of people with depression end up taking their lives. But untreated depression is a major risk factor for suicide.

Research shows depression rates are the same in country and city communities, but suicide rates are much higher among rural men. However, with the right treatment, most people recover from depression.

beyondblue is committed to continuing its work with local communities throughout Australia to raise awareness of depression, reduce associated stigma and encourage people to seek help.

People in rural communities in Australia are used to toughing it out and have always been extremely resilient. However, it's these same qualities of self-sufficient and resolve which can sometimes make country people – particularly men – less inclined to seek help for mental health problems.⁴

Making a living off the land is tough enough – including the pressures of drought and bushfires – and we need to get the message out that help is at hand and that depression is not a weakness.

It's important to note that stress is not depression. However acute distress, associated with tough times can occur and may be a risk factor for depression if it persists.

One in five people in Australia will experience depression at some point in their lives. If it's not you, then maybe it's someone you know.

We want people across Australia, wherever they live, to be aware of the signs and symptoms of depression and seek help from a doctor or mental health professional if they're worried about themselves or someone else.

Information about depression is freely available on the *beyondblue* website www.beyondblue.org.au or by calling the *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636 (local call).

Leonie Young

CEO

***beyondblue*: the national depression initiative**

⁴ *beyondblue* Depressing Monitor, 2002.