The dark shadow of work: Suicide among working age adults

20 February 2014, Australia: Most deaths by suicide are among people of working age. Suicide is the leading cause of death for males aged 25–44 years and females aged 25–34 years. Adults spend about a third of their waking hours at work. Suicide is mostly preventable yet significant gaps exist in our understanding of the relationship between work and suicide, limiting prevention efforts. One Australian study found that 17% of suicides in Victoria from 2000–2007 were work-related.

In a position statement released today at the Construction Industry inaugural Mental Health Conference in Brisbane, Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) identifies the workplace as playing a vital role in the creation of a suicide safe community.

SPA calls on organisations of all sizes to implement workplace policies and programs that promote a mentally healthy workforce and prevent suicide behaviours. The position statement provides recommendations for employers to take action to prevent suicide. It also offers an in-depth analysis of the case for change including risk factors, evidence-based activities and programs that can be implemented in the workplace and policy analysis. This is rounded off with practical information for responding to suicide including case studies and links to resources to assist organisations implement the recommendations.

Sue Murray, CEO of SPA, says, “Employers may be surprised at how simple it can be to take an active role in suicide prevention. There is a wide range of support available from organisations working in mental health and suicide prevention to assist employers prepare for and respond to suicide”. SPA highlights the importance of business leaders taking an active role in promoting a culture that supports mental health promotion.

“We have seen outstanding leadership from the construction, rail and superannuation industries and as a result these groups are leading the way in workplace suicide prevention in Australia”, says Murray. Case studies available in the position statement highlight exemplar programs.

In addition, SPA believes urgent action is required to address a range of systemic issues including managing unemployment, workers compensation and coronial processes.

Sue Murray states, “Evidence from Europe suggests that an increase of 1% in the unemployment rate relates to a 0.79% increase in suicide rates. In the USA they have seen more of a 1-to-1 relationship. This is the dark shadow cast by rising unemployment levels. It is critical that we invest in suicide prevention as well as labour market programs during times of economic downturn.”

SPA is the backbone organisation of the National Coalition for Suicide Prevention that includes more than 20 not-for-profit organisations including beyondblue, Lifeline, Black Dog Institute, R U OK? Day, SANE, National LGBTI Health Alliance. Together, the National Coalition is targeting men of working age in their suicide prevention efforts. SPA hopes to have active involvement of business in the National Coalition in the near future.

SPA’s position statement on Work and Suicide Prevention can be downloaded at www.suicidepreventionaust.org/resources

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About Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA):

www.suicidepreventionaust.org

SPA is the peak body for the suicide prevention sector in Australia. SPA works collaboratively to develop a community that knows how to ask for help and how to give help. As the lead agency of the National Suicide Prevention Coalition, we build and facilitate partnerships to reduce the stigma around mental illness and suicide, and to assist the healing for people with lived experience of suicide attempts and suicide.

For further information and advice on how to report on mental illness and suicide responsibly, visit www.mindframe-media.info.

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