



## NSW Ministry of Data – Suicide Prevention Data Forum

### Opening address by Hayley Purdon – Roses in the Ocean, Lived Experience Advisory Committee

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge those with a lived experience who are with us in the room today. Whether you have lived through a suicidal crisis, experience thoughts of suicide, have cared for a suicidal loved one or are bereaved by suicide, you have a tremendous amount of strength and resilience and I acknowledge the difficult journey you have encountered. If you are currently suicidal, or caring for a loved one who is, please know that there is hope for a better tomorrow and take every day one step at a time. You have a strong and supportive community here in the suicide prevention sector.

All of your voices of lived experience have power and you can make a difference.

I would also acknowledge the work of all of you here today, particularly those working with people with direct experience. Working with each other is the only way we will reduce suicide rates and you are the vehicle for this change.

We are here today to discuss suicide data but what we are really talking about are people. We are talking about people who have died by suicide, and what the numbers represent are the true human experiences of incredible pain and loss.

This week was the release of the 2017 suicide statistics and I am sure we will hear much about these numbers today, but I want to take you back 10 years to 2008, where the rate of suicide was 10.9 per 100,000, as compared to the 12.6 per 100,000 in 2017.

In 2008, the ABS recorded 2,191 deaths by suicide. 78% of these people were male, statistics which could mean many different things to you. Let me give them a new meaning.

One of these suicides was by Mark.

Mark was Australia's youngest fighter pilot, flying Mirages and FA-18 Hornets for 12 years before moving to Hong Kong to fly internationally for Cathay Pacific.

From the outside looking in you could imagine it was a glorious life to be living

Then life happened - Mark had three significant events occur in a very short space of time, and he found himself challenged on many levels. He sought help, and sadly found himself unable to fly - he was off the flight deck, his family strongly believe that this is when he lost his previous strong self-identity, he was struggling to find his sense of purpose, embarrassed that he was now in this limiting life situation.

For every one Australian we lose to suicide, it is estimated that there are 30 people who attempt to die by suicide. In 2008, that equates to 65,730 people.

I was one of them. I had spent years battling depression, anxiety and an eating disorder. I felt alone and lost and when I asked for help, I didn't get the help I needed. I began to believe that suicide was my only option.

When we think of suicide data, we need to remember the ripple effect of suicide. Those who die or attempt are not the only ones affected by suicide. It has been estimated that for every suicide, 135 people are affected. In 2008, that meant 361,515. Just stop and think about this for a minute can you even picture a space big enough to hold that many people, we would need 3.5 MCG's at least on a yearly basis! This estimation doesn't even begin to capture the far-reaching impact of suicide in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

One of those people impacted is Bronwen Edwards, Mark's sister.





After losing Mark to suicide, Bronwen created Roses in the Ocean to break down prejudice and discrimination, acknowledge the loss that suicide brings and enable those who are struggling, to seek help. It has now become a powerful vehicle to enable those with a lived experience find their voice and tap into their expertise.

Roses in the Ocean represents the voices of those with lived experience of these suicide experiences and more. All those that contribute to Roses in the Ocean believe that their experiences can influence positive reform in National Suicide Prevention policies, ensure funding is making its way to program development and educational experiences that better equip everyday people to be part of the solution to lowering the numbers of deaths to suicide.

The release of the sheer number of people who died by suicide in 2017 was alarming and horrifying. There are a number of ways forward I wish to highlight on behalf of those with a lived experience.

1. We need action.

The 2010 Senate inquiry, *The Hidden Toll: Suicide in Australia*, made 9 recommendations about suicide data systems and many of these are still not actioned. The agenda for this forum today would be quite different if they had been. In the 8 years since the senate recommendations 22,044 Australians have died by suicide, 6082 of those have been in NSW, and there has been immeasurable suffering - and we are still having the same conversation. It's not good enough. Today must be a day focused on action. The agenda speaks of 'future possibilities' and 'next steps'. Let's not walk out of here without a clear plan for action and a sense of urgency.

2. Make data accessible.

Ultimately it's our data, the community's data, not researchers or policy makers. A suicide prevention data systems needs to be built so data is available to everyone with a legitimate and responsible role in suicide prevention. This includes making sure the outputs like reports are understandable and respectful to every reader. Resources need to be built in to support access for non-traditional experts so that all can understand and use the data.

3. Connect the dots

Too long have datasets been limiting in the story they tell. We need our governments to break down the barriers between different data sources - coronial, police, ambulance, hospital and health. A top down approach to this will reduce wastage of precious financial and Human Resources. While this forum is looking primarily at NSW data, we need our governments to rise above jurisdictional needs and work together to create a national system, that still allows localised data intelligence. People move, travel, have interstate relationships...the ripple effect of suicide needs to be taken into account even in our data systems.

4. Improved governance

Lived experience needs to be built into the central and top governance structures. This needs to be more than a token position on a committee or board. Lived Experience needs a clear role in decision making. Why? Because we keep things focused on the help that can be mobilised in our communities today. We also advocate for every individual who is represented in the data and make sure they are remembered and respected. We drive the urgency that is needed.

Voices of lived experience are essential to understanding the true nature and impact of suicide and I urge you to not only consider data as deaths, hospitalisations, demography and other quantitative concepts, but recognise the value of harnessing the data available from those with a lived experience. It is only then that we can make a real change and stem the tide of suicide.

