

The cycle of military and veteran suicidality

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On the 22 October 2019 the federal government passed the Australian Veterans Recognition Bill. According to the Minister for Veterans and Defence Personnel, Darren Chester, ‘the bill provides a formal way for all Australians to show their appreciation to our current and former Australian Defence Force personnel. The covenant, veteran card and lapel pin allows the community the opportunity to recognise the service and sacrifice of the men and women who have served our nation.’

One service man or woman takes their own life each week – our government’s response - ‘thank you for your service’. Pins and discounts are of no use when you are dead.

It is not war which is killing our military personnel and nor is it returning from deployment. Veteran suicide is not simply about ‘mental health’ as much of the white noise in this space would have you believe.

Military suicide is about changing relations between how a veteran perceives their situation, perceives themselves in that situation, and perceives what courses of action are available to them at any point of time. These perceptions are premised on how Defence and DVA – that is DDVA, manage, and construct, the veteran.

In Australia, contemporary service is not characterised by conscription or national service but by a professional occupation within a public institutional setting. It is about a career which requires a continual readiness for deployment as opposed to the popular narrative which singularly views service through ‘returning from war’.

The narrative about ‘returning from war’, articulated by DDVA, circulated within the veteran community, broadcast by the media, and consumed by the public, naturalises the assumption that military suicide is a sad consequence of an individual’s pathology. Yet, this is not the case.

Analysis demonstrates that it is the systemic mismanagement of people by DDVA which precludes crisis. Defence abuse, institutional maladministration, and military suicide go hand in hand.

Within the contemporary environment, the confusion between historical service and contemporary service has led to organisational complexities and poorly targeted policy and supports. It has led to a lack of oversight, innovation, research, and agility. And it has created a lack of transparency, accountability, and independence. Leadership and the systems that regulate are in crisis.

If the base systems and environments that support both our serving and ex-serving personnel are not fundamentally changed, it will not matter how much money is thrown at veteran homelessness, families, transitions, mental health, or employment services. The cycle will continue, and veteran suicide rates will continue to rise. We are not talking about a ‘few bad apples’ or a ‘couple of disgruntled veterans’ but out-of-date- archaic systems which are creating significant harm.

The military suicide

Archaic rank structures and socialisation processes that are still practiced within Defence are direct contributors to military suicide.

Current military socialisation practises are executed with the purpose of breaking the civilian identity and the formation of the military mindset. Whilst it is currently still practiced as a core requirement for group cohesion, conformity and strict hierarchy, socialisation practices, which are ironically dividing practices, create significant harm.

Intrinsically linked to these practices is the rank structure. As a structure that predates democracy, rank and command is premised on class affiliations between commissioned officers and ordinary ranks. It affirms an elitist identity with a naturalised perception of right to command over responsibility to lead.

As an avenue for systemic abuse, power is centralised within rank and command, which overlaps with the Military Justice System and Joint Health Command. Command always trumps individual human rights – like the right to a fair trial, to independent counsel or to independent health assessments. It is linked to sexual and physical abuse, bullying and workplace harassment, career destruction, misuse of information, WHS incidents, redirecting justice, and failure to report.

Notably, individuals with the lowest rank have the least amount of agency, status, power, and access to education and resources. The lower the rank the higher the co-dependency on the institution and the susceptibility to misuse of power and harm. Whilst some consequences are significant in nature many are subtle. This subtlety means that an individual increasingly becomes institutionalised and perceives no other option but to positively align with behaviour that would not be acceptable in any other Australian place of work. And certainly, is not acceptable within the court of law.

Yet, the age worn argument for authoritarian practices and rank structure continues. Defence documentation argues that this approach continues for one reason because ‘it works’. I find this argument unconvincing and archaic.

Whilst the mission and structure of Defence has evolved and kept pace of the contemporary environment, the management of people employed have not. As a result, the cost of ineffective practices and socialisation processes has become immense. In a time with unprecedented access to best practice, Defence still unnecessarily harms individuals by ignoring the most current information available. Without changes to socialisation practices and the punitive class structure, culture will not change, people will not change, and military suicidality will continue.

The veteran suicide

After leaving the ADF, the consequence of practices facilitated in Defence are inherited by DVA who further complicate the cycle via complex bureaucratic processes, stigmatisation, and victimisation.

The Productivity Commission report, recommended by the senate as a response to veteran suicide in 2017, detailed that DVA and the veteran compensation system was not fit-for-purpose and recommended sweeping changes to both DVA and Defence; changes built on contemporary models and best practice. Yet, to date, we still have not received a response from the government.

To ensure that the cycle of suicide is broken, the recommendations from the Productivity Commission report and the Advocacy Scoping report must be implemented - not cherry picked and not changed. There are three key recommendations that are root to breaking the cycle of military and veteran suicidality.

The first is the creation of an independent statutory agency to administer the veteran compensation system. As the Productivity Commission found, DVA, by virtue of being a public department, is not structured appropriately to adequately run the system. Logically, you cannot keep trying to put a round peg in a square hole and hope for a different outcome.

The professionalisation of the veteran sector is the second. Professionalisation is vital to ensure that veterans receive supports built on contemporary best practice and equity in application. Professionalisation is essential to ensure policy formation is constructed on evidence-based research and not the over-reliance on unqualified opinion.

The last recommendation, which is base to breaking the cycle, is the levying of a premium on Defence. In Australia, Defence is the only employer that is not held to account for injuring their own employees. It is not war, or mental health which is breaking our veterans but the mismanagement of people by Defence. The levy will work as an incentive for Defence to look after their own. Anything less is unacceptable. Without such a levy, nothing will change.

A way forward

As our military leaders understand, any campaign requires a coordinated attack. It requires an analysis of the terrain and a fundamental plan of action. Because DDVA are public institutions, such a campaign can only be spear headed by a Royal Commission. The importance of this is not to lay blame, but to understand the complex web of systems which military personnel and veterans interact with daily. There are no silver bullets in this process, but if a concerted campaign is not forthcoming, we will end up in the same place time and time again.

Since 1970 there have been around 80 inquiries into military abuse, injustice, mental health, compensation and cultural change. Yet, DDVA persist in cyclical cosmetics and self-investigation. A Royal commission will ensure that over-lapping and complex systems of governance receive the scrutiny required to construct a fundamental plan of action moving forward.

To date, defence abuse, institutional maladministration, and military suicide have gone hand in hand. It is systemic because those that have power often exercise rights and discretions that they do not possess. It remains systemic because rolling inquiries result in minimal change. Age worn arguments of ‘because it works’, ‘protect the institution’, and ‘uniqueness of service’ is unconvincing. An archaic ideology of ‘ostentatious entitlement’ is silently taking lives.

Undoubtedly, creating change within institutions and organisations steeped in history and tradition, is an onerous and difficult task. It will take the government and the DDVA much courage and integrity to demonstrate and practice a commitment to change. Nobody said that it would be easy – just that it is necessary. By bringing all the pieces of military and veteran suicide together, a Royal Commission provides the blueprint for finding a way forward.