



## **The Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health**

### **Submission to the**

### **INQUIRY INTO THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORTHERN AUSTRALIA**

#### **The Issues**

34% Australians live outside major urban and regional centres. This statistic is of particular relevance to Northern Australia's economic and social infrastructure development.

At least one in five rural and remote Australians will suffer from a mental illness in any one year. The ACRRMH's research into remote Australia's mining, resource and construction sectors suggest that this figure could increase up to one in three.

Suicide rates, already higher than in urban areas, increase exponentially as remoteness increases, more so among young Indigenous males.

Australians who live and work in rural and remote regions, especially Northern Australia, make a disproportionate contribution to Australia's economy through agriculture and mining and account for 67% of the value of Australia's exports.

They make this contribution in conditions characterised by incessant and destabilising change, economic and financial uncertainty and extreme weather events. Ravaged again and again by drought, fires and floods, rural and remote communities are often marked by a lack of the sort of services from mental health and other professionals that urban Australians take for granted.

These challenges faced by individuals, families and their rural and remote communities are not diminishing.

Australians who live and work in the farming and resource sectors of Northern Australia have disproportionately high levels of mental illness, co-morbidity and suicides relative to urban Australians. In light of their collective contribution to our economic prosperity, we believe they are not valued or recognised as they do not receive the support and services they deserve.

#### **The Solution – Awareness, Education, Prevention**

For eight years the ACRRMH has been creating and delivering innovative, practical and cost-effective interventions which improve mental health and social wellbeing and build resilience in rural and remote Australia in a "whole person, whole community" context. Accordingly, the Centre is well placed to advocate for Northern Australia.

## ***The economic argument for mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes***

A recent report published by the Health Programme of the European Union in May 2013 on the “Economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes and of their potential contribution to EU health, social and economic policy objectives” provides a strong economic case for evidence-based prevention and early intervention initiatives with regard to mental health.

The report stressed the value of government investments used to build mental health and social and emotional wellbeing by implementing awareness, education and early intervention programmes. The report highlighted the numerous positive effects of interventions on the mental health and the quality of life of individuals and communities, and the very significant economic benefits including but not limited to public expenditure savings. Selected programmes demonstrated mental health improvements among their targeted population, and the report estimated their potential contribution to reducing pressures on health and social welfare systems, employers, and the economy as a whole.

For example, for every euro invested in mental health prevention, this research provided evidence that between €0.81 and €13.62 could be saved. The net economic benefits generated by these programmes could be up to €135 billion.

The majority of the interventions generate sufficient benefits to outweigh the costs. This is also reflected in the workplace case studies, whereby all the companies interviewed stated that economic analysis of workplace mental health promotion and mental disorder prevention programmes resulted in significant positive impacts on employee wellbeing, reduced absenteeism and increased productivity.

### ***Small shift in expenditure = very significant efficiency gains***

In summary, the report found that even a small shift in expenditure from treatment to prevention generated very significant efficiency gains, a broad range of pay-offs and benefits that lasted for many years.

Mental health expenditure in Australia in 2008 was \$5.3 billion and it is estimated that \$1.8 billion was spent on rural and remote Australians.

It is clear that lives can be saved in Northern Australia and scarce resources can be profitably redirected or redistributed.

### ***Individual and Community Outcomes***

As well as the obvious benefits to individuals, families and communities, the delivery of innovative and compelling services and programmes which raise awareness, de-stigmatise mental illness, educate individuals and encourage the early seeking of help, lessens the demand for expensive tertiary interventions which are either non-existent or in short supply in Northern Australia.

### ***System Outcomes***

Primary mental health interventions and educational programmes such as those delivered by the ACRRMH ultimately reduce demand for services in the following portfolio areas and have a positive impact on related industries:

- Health and Mental Health
- Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
- Resources and Energy
- Social and Community Services

- Indigenous Employment and Health
- Regional Australia

**The Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health delivers unique, evidence-based and cost-effective ways of addressing these needs and realising these benefits.**

It does this for three key sectors:

- those who live and work in the agricultural sector;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; and
- those who live and work in the mining and resource sector.

In remote locations the Centre's programmes and services fill a void especially in relation to delivering culturally specific information and messages to these hard-to-reach and often inaccessible groups.

The Centre's programmes tackle the cultural disconnect between traditional health promotion and culturally-targeted, de-stigmatising programs by understanding and addressing the issues in a manner that engages, involves everyone directly thereby ultimately changing their behaviour and attitudes to mental health problems.

ACRRMH has a solid reputation for cost efficiency, accountability and strong governance.

### ***ACRRMH Programmes and Services***

#### **Programmes for farmers and the agricultural workforce**

The ACRRMH programmes:

- identify local needs,
- link people in rural and remote communities, and
- share capacity-building programs and mental health and suicide preventions interventions between communities.

One such program with a strong evidence base, *Building Bridges* has been expanding across south-western Queensland for some years.

In order to tackle the psychological, physical and financial impact of droughts, fires and floods and, more recently, the tensions arising from the changing use of land and resources, programs such as *Building Bridges* ensure a consultative process, provide a co-ordinating mechanism for local agencies and guarantee outcomes by and for each community.

Examples of elements of the programmes comprise:

- educative workshops for the general rural workforce eg banks, retailers, stock and station agents etc to equip them to recognise and refer clients;
- awareness-raising, preventative and protective strategies, how to access information and pathways to help and services for caring community members including farmers and agricultural workers, retirees and young people; and
- the renewal of courage and optimism through uplifting, family events which draw families in from their isolated working conditions, for example,
  - Roadshows (morale-building concerts, family BBQs and access to health providers and subtle but effective messages – previous roadshows have featured John Schumann (ex Redgum, writer of “I Was Only 19” see CV) and the Vagabond Crew <http://youtu.be/-Xu2MjrU-TQ>;
  - Sporting events; and

Rural and Remote Mental Health Ltd is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee with DGR status trading as the Australasian Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health - [www.acrrmh.com.au](http://www.acrrmh.com.au)

ABN: 33 120 994 916

- Eminent, popular, celebrity speakers for community events.

### **Programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**

The acclaimed suicide prevention one-day workshop, *Deadly Thinking*, is designed by and for those who live in rural or remote communities. *Deadly Thinking* is aimed at community leaders and natural helpers who play active leadership roles in Indigenous communities. They are then empowered to share the social and emotional wellbeing information with their families and communities. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYIS7v1Pt6U>

*Creative Livelihoods* is an innovative, evidence-based mental health intervention for people in regional and remote Indigenous communities who have a mental health problem or who are at high risk. It encourages people of all ages to join in arts and music activities that lead to marked improvements in individual social and emotional wellbeing and in many cases creating livelihoods.

### **Programmes for mining, resource and remote construction sectors**

ACRRMH is widely recognised as a leader in the design, development and delivery of strategies to address the mental health of people who live and work in the mining, resource and remote construction sectors. Specifically, ACRRMH's *Minds in Mines* programme:

- is unique in that it delivers sustainable, comprehensive, integrated, preventative mental health strategies to workforces in mining, resource and remote construction companies;
- increases awareness, grows understanding and reduces the stigma of mental health that is so often a feature of the male dominated, "macho" mining environment; and
- improves the early identification and prevention of mental problems before they turn into expensive mental illnesses that require Employee Assistance Provider interventions, over-stretched general practitioners, health workers and scarce mental health professionals providing tertiary services in rural areas.

For further information contact:

Dr Jennifer Bowers  
CEO/MD  
ACRRMH

February 2014