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Inquiry into Suicide Prevention in Australia
The Senate
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<div align="center">A Submission to the Inquiry into Suicide Prevention in Australia</div>

Dear Members,

I'd like to thank Australia's Senators for providing this opportunity to make a submission to an inquiry on suicide. My submission primarily addresses your fourth term of reference, although with a stronger bent towards public education.

Sadly, my girlfriend committed suicide, aged 41, with two lovely kids and her whole life ahead of her. She told me she had been sexually abused as a child and perhaps not surprisingly was a heavy user of prescribed medication as an adult. She generally looked very happy but a minor relationship problem probably led her to have exaggerated worries that the new future she was forging would not happen, and rather than face this uncertainty she chose to give up. A solution to her very human problem (her anxiety, her despair and her depression) was not apparent to her. She clearly did not have the weapons to fight her feelings of hopelessness. And the manner of her death has affected the lives of a great many people - her kids, her family, her friends, and her school community where she was a prep teacher and adored by her 4 and 5 year old students. None of these people can understand her actions and many have felt considerable guilt for not being in tune with how she was really feeling. None more so that myself – you see I'm a psychologist.

At 10.30 am today, a very courageous Australian June Middleton died, aged 82. June was recognised in 2007 by Guinness World Records for an unenviable world record - the longest time spent by a human in an iron-lung, now some 60 years. Can you imagine what her daily life was like? Total and permanent dependency, with little or no freedoms. Yet dying was not her request. She lived for every breath. Similarly to June, my dad was also paralysed by polio in the 1950s, and he also courageously fought for every breath.

When "It" hits the fan, why is it that some, like my girlfriend, who have much going for them choose to take their life and others, like June and my dad, who have a lot less going for them choose to fight for every breath? I've struggled with this thought for the past decade, and tried very hard to learn why.

My research has led me to see there is a need for government to address two important problems if our community is to successfully reduce the risks of suicide and its impacts on others.

The first is that 'many' in our community today are, like my girlfriend, ill equipped to *solve* their human problems. Stress, despair, anxiety and depression are on the march; feelings that are primary antecedents to suicide. An epidemic is occurring, with the World Health Organization concluding that depression will be the world's major health problem by 2020. To deny this problem is akin to the climate change cynics. Increasing use of drugs (both legal and illegal) provides many people with some relief from this growing human problem, but drugs will not *solve* their human problems. Clearly our society needs to discover real solutions to this epidemic.

From what I've now read, psychology grounded interventions that help re-educate people's thinking are providing real solutions. Basic general education in the community to raise awareness and to teach cognitive techniques (like improving positive thinking) and behaviour techniques (like copying positive role models) are real solutions to these human problems that are antecedents to suicide risk. Learning to relax, learning to control one's extreme negative emotions, and learning to reduce stress are others. Learning how to share one's personal problems with others is also obviously important, as to is getting help in how to set new life goals. The importance too of learning how to recognise the seeds passed on from one's own family is no more dramatically illustrated than in the statistics that show that some families suffer from higher incidence of suicide and attempted suicide.

Unfortunately, too little of this type of eduction is done in our community and in our schools. I suspect you will already be familiar with the wise quote from Lord Chesterfield who once wrote, "If we do not plant knowledge when young, it will give us no shade when we are old." Passing to our young ones the knowledge of how to positively adjust to their life problems and the increasing stresses of life should be a key responsibility of today's government's and government institutions including our schools.

I decided to have a go myself at providing some of this education and recently finished writing a book on what I learned during my research. I've been somewhat torn about whether to mention this in my submission in case you misunderstand this as some sort of cheap marketing effort. My submission is too important to be undermined by that perception. Yet, I'm also certain the information contained in the book provides many clues to solving these human problems; the sort of information I would have wanted my girlfriend to know, which I'm sure would have encouraged her to make a different decision. The book will be launched in January 2010 and is titled *Bouncing Back with CHANGES*.

For many years, my profession has closely studied people coming into our psychology practices whose life has come off the tracks. In recent years we've come to realise that we can learn much more about how to succeed by studying people who succeed than we can from those that have failed. That is why I've included in my book stories of some remarkable people that succeeded in rebounding from their life's problems and the clues these stories reveal, rather than focus on why my girlfriend did not. I've also backed up those clues with reference to over 100 years of empirical research drawn from more than 60 publications.

I believe this type of positive information should be made available to every school child to better equip them to *solve* their human problems in their adolescent and later adult lives.

The second problem I've come to realise is that our government needs to help build some important social values in our community; values that will reduce the antecedents to suicide - stress, anxiety, despair, depression.

To understand which values, I think we first need to ask why our society is breeding this epidemic in depression and anxiety. Once we better understand why this is occurring, then we'll be in a better position to vaccinate against it.

I do not pretend to know these answers. Government needs to fund research to understand causes. But I do sense from my research that a key problem is a growing feeling across all sectors of our community of being alone, and without support. I know its hard to understand how people can feel so alone with so many millions of others around them, yet this seems to be occurring….at least in our heads. I've come to believe this can be partly attributed to the crumbling of what I will call each adult's NUCLEUS. Let me explain.

In Biology, nucleus refers to the central core around which other things cluster. Here, I'm using this word to define our emotional bedrock - our 'psychological' core. We all have it. For some, that rock is firm and solid, and protects us through life; for others it's loose and shifting which can put us at risk, as I believe it did for my girlfriend. Sexual abuse guaranteed her vulnerability. Psychoanalyst Bowlby (1988) used a similar concept with her term 'secure base' which she used to describe the solid emotional foundation that young children gain from parents and early family life that enables kids to achieve normal social and emotional development. Children become happier adults from a secure family base.

Continuing high rates of breakdowns in primary relationships is one obvious social problem that is cracking our citizen's nucleus – clearly also our children's secure base. Research verifies that this support is a very powerful force that cushions people from the stressful effects of life's problems (Wills & Fegan, 2001; Diener & Seligman, 2002). I wonder how much of the increase in random attacks in our cities and increases in drug usage are directly related to fractures in people's nucleus. I also wonder how much of the increasing gang-like alliances of our young people is occurring because our kids need to prop up their secure base in the face of fractured family life.

So can a stronger nucleus be built in adult life? Of course it can. Highlighting the importance of relationships, Confucius wrote, "Most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others." A strong adult nucleus can be built on our adult relationships. So, finding ways to help people build strong and healthy personal relationships is a key to addressing the real problems of anxiety and depression that are plaguing our community.

To sum up, our government's have helped our society achieve considerable affluence and awesome advancements in medicine, education, technology, transportation, economics and

communications that make human life longer, healthier and overall more comfortable. Yet we are not getting any happier. Nor is suicide decreasing. Now is the time for our government to help us make advances in learning how to *solve* our human problems - how to adapt, how to change, and particularly how to constructively bounce back when difficulties occur. Like Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, our political leaders need to step up and pave the way in also helping our society develop new values, in our case in some important areas such as improving our relationships so we can face life and its inevitable difficulties with a secure nucleus.

I read the other day that suicide has now become the number one killer of people under the age of 35 in Australia. What a disgrace to our community. Increasing stress, anxiety, despair and depression are the problems of today. Today's governments need to find real solutions.

Increasing stress, anxiety, depression, and despair is the problem that underpins not only suicide but also many other social difficulties of our time, including drug use. Any government that takes action to improve our citizen's ability to positively cope with their life's problems, including building new values around our personal relationships, will reap tremendous rewards for our community.

Thank you again for this opportunity to express my views on this tragic problem.

Tony Vickers-Willis

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