



SOUTH AUSTRALIA POLICE
KEEPING SA SAFE

POLICE

Your Ref:
Our Ref:
Enquiries: Supt. Doug Barr
Telephone: 08 8172 5101
Facsimile:

7 May 2010

Senate Community Affairs References Committee
PO Box 6100, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600
c/o community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au



Re: Suicide in Australia inquiry.

I refer to your letter of 13 April 2010 regarding your inquiry into suicide in Australia and thank you for the invitation to make a submission. SAPOL does not seek to appear before or make any oral submission to the inquiry. I provide the following information that may be of some assistance to your inquiry.

SAPOL's experience is that there are a number of factors that impact upon the accuracy of suicide reporting. These primarily relate to the ability to discern if the death is in actual fact a suicide. Some examples of circumstances regularly encountered would include;

- Drug overdoses which may be either suicide or death by misadventure;
- Hangings where there is the possibility of autoeroticism; (although in most cases there are indicia of this it may not always be the case)
- Murder / suicides which may in fact be a double suicide;
- Motor vehicle accidents where the sole occupant driver has driven into a fixed object;
- Drowning where the deceased's mental health is in issue, but accident is unable to be negated; or
- Falls from a height which can be difficult to ascertain as either accidental or deliberate.

Notwithstanding a thorough investigation, the intent of the decedent can on occasion be unable to be satisfactorily determined. Where there is no definitive evidence, compelling circumstances or a suicide note for example, the stigma associated with suicide may lead to a preference to categorise the death as accidental.

In regard to the role of police in assisting people at risk, SAPOL considers its primary roles to be as follows:

- the thorough investigation of all 'reportable deaths' within the meaning of the Coroners Act 2003 (SA) to enable the Coroner to determine the cause and circumstances of the death so as to be able to make recommendations that might prevent, or reduce the likelihood of a recurrence of other such deaths;
- in cases of attempted suicide seeking the intervention of health professionals, including by utilising legislative provisions, such as detaining persons pursuant to mental health legislation where appropriate;
- assisting health workers when there are issues of safety in dealing with a person attempting or contemplating suicide, to reduce the risk to a safe level to enable intervention; and
- acting as a referral service to health agencies.

SAPOL provides all operational officers with a suicide awareness program to provide officers with information enabling them to;

- understand common misconceptions about suicide.
- explain the nature of suicidal behaviour.
- discuss reasons why people commit suicide.
- list and describe indicators of suicidal risk.
- list and explain methods of intervening with a person who is threatening suicide.
- explain common reasons for suicidal behaviour in police custody.
- recall strategies to minimise risk of prisoners self harming in police custody.

Officers are also advised of support services available for SAPOL members. I hope this information is of some assistance to your inquiry.

Yours sincerely

(Gary T Burns)
ACTING COMMISSIONER OF POLICE