



Commissioner for Children and Young People
Western Australia

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Ms Megan Mitchell
National Children's Commissioner
Australian Human Rights Commission
GPO Box 5218
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Commissioner

Intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children

I welcome the opportunity to make a submission to your examination on intentional self-harm and suicidal behaviour in children and young people under 18 years of age. I agree with your view that this is a serious issue affecting Australian children and young people.

As acting Commissioner for Children and Young People in Western Australia, my role is to advocate for the more than 560,000 Western Australian children and young people under the age of 18, specifically having responsibility for advocating for, promoting and monitoring their wellbeing. Under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA) I am required to give priority to, and have special regard for, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

The mental health and wellbeing of WA children and young people is a priority area of work for my office. My submission will focus on the needs of Western Australian children and young people and relevant work by a number of Western Australian agencies including my own office.

The work of this office includes:

- The Wellbeing Monitoring Framework which monitors and reports on the wellbeing (including mental health) of Western Australian children and young people.
- An independent inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia

Caring for the future growing up today

The Wellbeing Monitoring Framework

The Wellbeing Monitoring Framework comprises three reports and provides a single reference point for research and data on Western Australian children and young people's wellbeing and evidence-based programs.

The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People contains information on 33 key measures of children and young people's wellbeing, categorised under eight domains, including measures relevant to children and young people's mental health.

The companion report *Building Blocks – Best practice programs* describes 82 best practice and promising programs from WA and other states and territories that have been independently evaluated and proven to improve children and young people's wellbeing. In the section starting on page 69 there is information on evidence-based programs that are successful in improving mental health outcomes.

In June this year I will be tabling Edition Two of *The State of Western Australia's children and young people*. This edition includes a new measure *Self-harm and suicide* and additional data for the *Mental health* measure. These measures are attached and provided in-confidence (until the report is tabled).

A second edition of *Building Blocks* will have information on additional programs that have been evaluated to improve the wellbeing (including mental wellbeing) of children and young people.

The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People and *Building Blocks* are available from my website www.ccyp.wa.gov.au

The Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia

In 2010 the former Commissioner, Michelle Scott, conducted an independent inquiry, the purpose of which was to report on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in WA and make recommendations that provided clear direction for action.

The Inquiry considered the whole spectrum of children and young people's mental health needs, including promotion of positive mental health and prevention, early intervention and treatment of mental health problems and disorders - from pregnancy through to adulthood.

Consultations were held with children and young people and 141 written submissions were received.

The overwhelming evidence to the Inquiry was that the mental health needs of WA children and young people had not been afforded sufficient priority and there is an urgent need for reform.

The Inquiry also found there is a general lack of understanding across the community that children and young people, including infants, suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression and that these are as real and debilitating as those experienced by adults.

The Inquiry report makes 54 recommendations that provide clear direction for action on what needs to be done at the Commonwealth and State levels and in the community-based sector to strengthen children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

The *Report of the Inquiry into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Western Australia* is available on my website www.cyp.wa.gov.au

The Inquiry received submissions about suicide and self-harm. Please refer to pages 155 and 156 for the findings and associated recommendation.

Aboriginal children and young people and children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged were a particular focus of the Inquiry. The needs of these specific groups including those living in regional and remote communities, in care and with diverse sexuality and gender are described in Chapter 5 (pp. 72–95).

A number of policy briefs have been published subsequent to the Inquiry which provide more detailed information about the mental health of specific groups including children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and those in contact with the criminal justice system.

I would also like to draw your attention to the work of Emeritus Professor Michael Chandler, an internationally renowned Canadian scholar in the field of Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention, specifically young people. Dr Chandler has visited Australia on several occasions and his work has a strong relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and public policy. In 2012 the Commissioner for Children and Young People supported several presentations by Professor Chandler in WA. See: www.ias.uwa.edu.au/lectures/2012_lectures/michael-chandler-lecture and cyp.wa.gov.au

Children in Immigration Detention

Since its inception, my office has undertaken work to promote and monitor the wellbeing of children and young people who are in immigration detention in WA. This included visiting the Leonora Alternative Place of Detention (APOD) in December 2010 when it housed families with children, and speaking with the children, their families, staff and members of the Leonora community. My submission to the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014 is attached for your information.

The Western Australian Suicide Prevention Strategy

In 2009 the WA government introduced a new suicide prevention strategy. Known as One Life (www.onelifewa.com.au/one-life-strategy/) it focused on engaging communities in designing and implementing their own resilience building and suicide prevention activities.

One Life has no specific focus on children and young people although it identifies young males in rural and remote areas, and Aboriginal people as high risk groups. It was delivered through Community Action Plans and my office has been advised that these included children and young people if they were identified by the community through the action planning process.

The initial funding for One Life has now concluded although the WA government has committed to further funding for small grants and training. Further information is available from the WA Mental Health Commission (www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au).

The independent Sellenger Centre, Edith Cowan University is responsible for the research and evaluation components of One Life (www.ecu.edu.au/schools/law-and-justice/research-activity/projects/current/sellenger-centre-social-wellbeing-research/evaluation-of-the-wa-suicide-prevention-strategy-one-life).

This office is of the view that One Life could have done more to focus on the needs of children and young people.

Auditor General for Western Australia

On May 7 2014 the Auditor General for Western Australia released his report into the implementation of One Life: *The Implementation and Initial Outcomes of the Suicide Prevention Strategy* (Available: www.audit.wa.gov.au). The Auditor concluded that One Life delivered benefits for individuals and communities but that with improved planning and governance the benefits could have been greater.

The Auditor General has previously conducted a Performance Examination into the management of deliberate self-harm of young people. The report *Life Matters: Management of deliberate self-harm in young people* is available: https://audit.wa.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/report2001_11.pdf

Ombudsman Western Australia

As part of his responsibility to review certain child deaths, the Western Australian Ombudsman identified a need to undertake a major own motion investigation into ways that State government departments and authorities can prevent or reduce suicide by young people. In April 2014 the Ombudsman tabled the report in the WA Parliament on his investigation. This report is available: www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Improving_Admin/AI_Reports.htm

The Coroner's Court of Western Australia

In 2008 the Western Australian Coroner (www.coronerscourt.wa.gov.au/) investigated and made findings into the deaths of 22 Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, including young people.¹ These deaths were the result of suicide or associated with alcohol and other drugs and occurred in the context of a significant increase in deaths due to self-harm by Aboriginal people in certain areas of the Kimberley. The Coroner made 27 recommendations as a result of his findings.

The Deputy State Coroner has also made a number of recommendations in regard to deaths by suicide.

¹ Hope, A 2008, *Report into the deaths of 22 Aboriginal people in the Kimberley*, Coroner's Court of Western Australia, Perth

Review of the admission or referral to and the discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia

The *Review of the admission or referral to and the discharge and transfer practices of public mental health facilities/services in Western Australia* (by Professor Stokes) was requested in 2011 by the Minister for Mental Health as one of three reviews about the suicide of people discharged from mental health services in WA.

Recommendations from the Deputy State Coroner and the Commissioner for Children and Young People are incorporated into Professor Stokes recommendations. The report of the Review is available:

www.mentalhealth.wa.gov.au/media_resources/policies_reports_forms/stokes.aspx

Telethon Kids Institute

The Telethon Kids Institute undertakes a significant amount of research in regard to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, including Aboriginal children and young people. You may like to consider contacting Winthrop Professor Steve Zubrick, Mr Glenn Pearson, Manager Aboriginal Health Research and Professor Sven Silburn (currently Director, Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research) regarding the Institute's research, examples of which include:

- *Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey: The Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children and Young People* (Vol. 2):
<http://aboriginal.telethonkids.org.au/kulunga-research-network/waachs/>
- *Deliberate Self Harm in Western Australia* research project:
<http://telethonkids.org.au/our-research/projects-index/d/deliberate-self-harm-in-western-australia/>
- *Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental and Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice* (Vol. 1 & 2):
<http://aboriginal.telethonkids.org.au/kulunga-research-network/working-together-2nd-edition-2014/>

In 2014 Professor Donna Cross was appointed Winthrop Professor, Mental Health Promotion at Telethon Kids Institute. She was previously Director, Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan University. Professor Cross is currently the lead investigator on seven 3-5 year longitudinal research projects aiming to prevent bullying, cyberbullying and associated mental health harms among Australian children and adolescents: <http://telethonkids.org.au/our-people/staff-student-index/c/donna-cross/>

You may also be interested in the following:

- Youth Focus: Provides early intervention services to prevent depression, suicide and self-harm for young people in metropolitan and regional WA. Ms Jenni Allen is the Chief Executive Officer. See also: <http://youthfocus.com.au/>
- Lifeline WA: It is my understanding that this organisation has been examining the interaction between social media and the suicide of young people. Ms Fiona Kalaf, Chief Executive Officer could provide more information (www.lifelinewa.org.au/).

- Dr Julian Dooley (Previously Associate Director, Sellenger Centre for Research in Law, Justice and Social Change (Edith Cowan University): Presented on the effectiveness of suicide prevention programs at the World Mental Health Conference Perth 2012. See: <http://www.perth2012.org/HandbookScreenVersion.pdf>.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Jenni Perkins', written in a cursive style.

JENNI PERKINS

A/Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

28 May 2014

enc:

Self-harm and suicide measure: *State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*

Mental Health measure: *State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition Two*

Submission to National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention 2014