

Researchers tackle Indigenous suicide

TEXT

Graham Ring

IMAGES

Kara Burn

Erin Neal

A suicide prevention project by the MENZIES CENTRE for CHILD DEVELOPMENT and EDUCATION is targeting one of the most susceptible groups in Australia, Indigenous youth in remote areas.

On one level, Indigenous suicide is about brutally confronting statistics: Young people in the Northern Territory die by suicide at a rate five times higher than the national figure. Most of them are Indigenous.

Health economists have formulas to quantify the economic cost to the community of the loss of these young lives. Human potential is going to waste, at great material cost to Indigenous communities and to the nation.

But at a human level, there is no way to measure the extent of misery visited on grief-stricken families. A dollar value cannot be ascribed to a mother weeping for the loss of a child gone too soon.

The nation is united in its horror at the statistics of Indigenous suicide. But while there is a real commitment on the part of Indigenous communities and across levels of government to address this tragedy, the

issues are complex and the precise actions that will turn things around are elusive.

Researchers at the Menzies Centre for Child Development and Education (CCDE), located on Charles Darwin University's Casuarina campus, are in the vanguard of efforts to develop the policies that will save lives.

Emphasis needs to be placed on taking early preventative action.

The centre is home to some of the nation's foremost experts in the field of Indigenous suicide prevention: Director Professor Gary Robinson, Professor Sven Silburn and Bernard Leckning.

In 2012, CCDE researchers, led by Professor Robinson, conducted extensive nationwide consultations on Indigenous suicide prevention. This

undertaking, conducted in partnership with the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, saw public consultations being held across the length and breadth of the continent.

These consultations, and the many written submissions made by individuals and organisations provided the underpinnings for the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy. The strategy, launched by the Federal Department of Health in May 2013, continues to be instrumental in guiding policy reform.

The difficult work of gathering the data on completed suicides needs to be approached in a rigorous and methodical manner. Careful analysis of this information by researchers can help them to apprehend at least some of the pieces of this saddening puzzle. What is clear is that



Bernard Leckning.



Professor Gary Robinson.



Professor Sven Silburn.



Menzies researchers are working to ensure that happy, healthy Indigenous children become happy, healthy Indigenous adults.

emphasis needs to be placed on taking early preventative action with vulnerable young people from childhood on.

Recent studies of child and youth suicide in the NT show that rates of Indigenous youth suicide are highest in remote areas. Remote communities are characterised by overcrowded housing, high rates of ill health and limited job opportunities. They are stressful environments and the young people who live in these locations are most vulnerable to suicide in late adolescence.

Suicide prevention starts with building resilience in these young people. To this end, the CCDE has developed the groundbreaking *Skills for Life* project. This project is implementing and evaluating a social-emotional learning curriculum in middle schools. *Skills for Life* is designed to give young Indigenous people the social and emotional competencies to cope with adversity, make positive life choices, and avoid self-destructive behaviours.

These skills can be nurtured by assisting young people to develop their capacities

in areas such as problem-solving, communication, social awareness and self-regulation that are known to be protective factors against suicidal behaviour.

The crew from Menzies CCDE is undertaking research that will inform their best efforts to address Indigenous suicide. They are on the ground in remote Indigenous communities, providing practical assistance to schools as part of an effort to support young people whose lives may be at risk today or in the future. 🌸