IT IS TIME TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

Today, in conjunction with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative we launch a new initiative aimed at raising awareness in this community of our high suicide rate. Most importantly we are calling on this community to take the time to find out what they can do to help by joining our Care To QPR: Question, Persuade, Refer campaign. Our goal is for 10 per cent of this community to be beacons in the fight against the darkness. In coming weeks we will bring you the stories of those directly impacted by suicide, stories like Ann Frankham’s today. 

Help us bring this issue into the light. 

LISA WACHSMUTH reports, P4-5. EDITORIAL P57.

Find out how you can become a QPR Gatekeeper inside today or via illawarramercy.com.au
Time to talk about suicide

BY USA WACHSMUTH

WHEN Ann Frankham returned to her work in the rag trade after a suicide attempt, she found the word ‘hypochondriac’ written on her garment presser.

It was 1974, Ann was 24 years old and living in Wollongong’s northern suburbs, still grieving the death of her beloved mother two years prior.

“For me it wasn’t premeditated. It was a reaction to my ongoing grief over the sudden loss of my mother for years prior.”

“I had to have surgery at Wollongong Hospital, and in the aftermath I just remembered feeling this shame and feeling very misunderstood.”

Today the Mercury, in collaboration with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative, is starting a series of articles, and sharing personal accounts like Ann’s, as part of a campaign to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide in the region.

All community members are encouraged to play their part by raising awareness, helping to reduce stigma and, importantly, undertaking an online suicide prevention training course called QPR, or Question, Persuade, Refer (see separate story).

Suicide rates in the region remain higher than the state average, with around 40 to 60 suicide deaths each year over the past decade according to new figures released this week by the Collaborative.

Dr Hains, regional manager of the Collaborative, says research suggests that for every suicide death there are more than 30 attempts, and an additional 200 people seriously considering suicide.

“It’s worth noting that suicide is unlike any other death in the way it affects communities,” he said.

“Research has found there are 130-plus people significantly affected every time there is a suicide death, sometimes resulting in further suicides.

“LIVED EXPERIENCE: South Coast resident Ann Frankham made an attempt on her life four decades ago, and is now sharing her story to help tackle high suicide rates in the Illawarra Shoalhaven. Picture: Robert Peet

“As a result, the crude number of suicide deaths should really be considered the ‘tip of the iceberg’.”

Nationwide, Dr Hains says, there was an average of 2795 deaths in the five-year period from 2012 to 2016 – equating to around eight people dying from suicide a day.

“Suicide has overtaken traffic accidents as a leading cause of death, with twice as many Australians dying by suicide than in car accidents,” he said. “Three out of four suicide deaths are male and more than a third (37 per cent) of people who suicide did not have a mental health condition.”

The local data for the Illawarra Shoalhaven shows that suicide affects every social and economic group and people from all sexual orientations and cultural, religious and language backgrounds.

“We now have access to the best data we’ve ever had on suicide – giving us a clearer picture of what’s actually going on in our region,” Dr Hains said. “It shows that there’s no one unique profile for those who die by suicide or attempt suicide.

“And while suicide rates are highest among middle aged people (41 to 55 years), there is no age group immune to suicide, including people aged 65 years plus.”

Which is why suicide is everyone’s business.
says Dr Hains, and why the Collaborative is using the data to inform a range of evidence-based suicide prevention activities across all sectors.

“We see that suicide is preventable, and we also see that right now this region has a fantastic opportunity to have a significant and sustainable impact on suicide,” he says. “While there’s lots of services doing really good things, what we’ve learnt is that in order to reduce the suicide rates for our region, we need to work more collaboratively with each other.”

That thinking led to the formation in 2015 of the Collaborative – which brings almost 40 organisations from across the region including health and education providers, local councils and businesses, and support and emergency services.

“We want everybody in the community to understand what role they play in suicide prevention – and feel confident and competent to play that role,” Dr Hains says.

In 2016 the Collaborative became one of four trial sites in NSW for LifeSpan, the nation’s largest integrated suicide prevention program developed by the Black Dog Institute.

Dr Fiona Shand of the Blackdog Institute is the research director for LifeSpan, which combines nine strategies into one community-led approach.

“Over the last two decades there’s been a gradual increase in suicide deaths so it was clear that what we were doing was not enough,” she said. “So we wanted to take an integrated approach and a regionally driven approach using the nine strategies.

“Some of them focus on people already at risk, others focus on ensuring people don’t get to that point in the first place.

“And the evidence suggests by implementing all these strategies at the same time we can expect to reduce suicide deaths by 20 per cent and suicide attempts by 30 per cent.”

For people like Ann, the integrated measures to reduce suicide are a “monumental step forward” in the way the community views, and works to prevent, suicide.

“I’m very lucky that I didn’t die on that particular night and that I managed to muddle through despite the stigma around suicide, the lack of access to support, at the time,” she said.

“My ongoing recovery has been helped by the support of good friends, by keeping connected with my community, and by my involvement in the arts – such as Bundanon’s community program.

“And I know I’m now making a difference in other people’s lives – just by having conversations with them, just by listening with no judgement. Because more often than not, people don’t want to die, they just want someone to listen – and that can be the hardest thing.

“So I’d say to people ‘Listen to what I’m saying, and what I’m not saying; look at me and see me, not just what you want to see’.

Over the next nine weeks, in the lead-up to R U OK Day on September 13, the Mercury will run a series of articles outlining what is being done in the region to save lives – and what help is available for those in crisis.

“If you’d like to talk to any one about the issues raised in this article call Lifeline on 13 11 14; Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 or MensLine 1300 789 978.

Three simple steps that could save a life

**QUESTION. Persuade. Refer.**

It’s three simple steps that anyone can learn to help save a life from suicide says Illawarra psychologist Dr Alex Hains. And – as community members are encouraged to learn CPR to potentially save lives – Dr Hains is urging the public to learn QPR to do the same for those people struggling with suicidal thoughts.

The regional manager of the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative said the internationally-renowned QPR training program had proven to be effective in saving lives.

“QPR is a one-hour online training course that costs just $10 - less than most people’s lunch - that will help people recognise and confidently respond to warning signs of suicide,” Dr Hains said.

“We want to get 10 per cent of the population in the Illawarra Shoalhaven to do QPR. If one in 10 people have done the training, it will mean people who are struggling are very likely to come into contact with people who will know how to help them.”

The Mercury has joined forces with the Collaborative to reach that goal, enlisting the help of local politicians and lobby for funding. And there’s been bipartisan support to roll out QPR locally - with Keira MP Ryan Park securing $10,000 from NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard to fund training for 1000 residents.

“The training will give people the confidence to ask a family member, friend or colleague, about their suicidal thoughts without reverting to awkward euphemisms,” Dr Hains said.

“One of the myths relates to the perceived danger of talking about suicide. That by talking to someone about suicide might put the idea in their minds and increase the risk. Instead we need to understand that we can ask people if they’re thinking about suicide and we can do that directly and by doing so it could save a life.”

Dr Hains says, is to listen and persuade people to access services. Referring people to GPs and psychologists and crisis support services such as Lifeline are good options; they could also be encouraged to get relationship advice, financial support or other assistance.

To obtain one of the 1000 free QPR licences, valid for three years, go to www.suicidepreventioncollaborative.org.au/QPR

- **Lisa Wachsmuth**
Life lessons for students

By Lisa Wachsmuth

Schoolyard and cyber-bullying lead to too many suicide deaths in young people - but for Isabella Brennan the reverse was true.

The bullying started for the Shellharbour girl after her suicide attempt at age 15, with verbal, written and even physical abuse coming thick and fast.

It was too much for Isabel-la to take, and she dropped out of high school. Now to take, and she dropped out of high school. She didn’t realise the impact on the other side.

Kylie Hani-gan, also adds the benefit of her lived experience to the collaborative. She’s not only witnessed her daughter’s struggles; as a funeral director she sees the immense grief of many who have lost loved ones to suicide.

“My daughter ended up in hospital after a suicide attempt, and I was so scared that young people are more likely to take their own life than die in motor vehicle accidents.

“I then joined funeral directors Hansen &Cole 12 months ago, and eight weeks afterwards we had one of Isabella’s friends come through who had died by suicide.

“It was heart wrenching, and since then there’s been many more, and staff are all trained to have those relevant conversations with families and friends, who are susceptible too.”

Isabella said she was put in place to reduce suicide deaths, and attempts.

“Black Dog has brought about a con/fidential and safe environment.

“Maybe those girls saw bullying as having a bit of fun with someone at school - they didn’t realise the impact they could have on someone’s life,” Isabella said.

“That’s why it’s so important that young people are taught about mental health and suicide, that they know what they should say - and not say - to their peers who are struggling.”

Young people can be particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, self-harm or suicide, according to Black Dog Institute researcher Dr Michelle Tye.

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That’s why the institute partnered with the NSW Department of Education to trial YAM in this region in terms one and two this year. So far more than 3500 Year 9 students, from 25 independent secondary schools, have completed the program.

“Black Dog has brought this program to Australia as part of the LifeSpan approach to suicide prevention.

“It works by improving mental health broadly, and there’s a con/fidential and safe environment.

“Destigmatising this area, mental health and suicide prevention, “ he said.

As part of the YAM roll out, with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative, Isabella, now 18, is also sharing her experiences to inform new strategies to help other young people.

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HELPING OTHERS: Shellharbour teenager Isabella Brennan was relentlessly bullied after making an attempt on her life three years ago; now she and her mother Kylie Hanigan share their experiences as members of the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative.

“Destigmatising this area, giving young people the information and coping skills and letting them know where to get help is vital.”

As part of the YAM roll out, the QPR: Question, Persuade, Refer online suicide prevention course was also promoted to school staff and parents.

The Mercury, with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative, is also running a campaign to get more people to sign up to QPR.

As part of that, NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard funded 1000 courses (usual cost $10). To secure one of the 300 remaining free courses visit www.suicidepreventioncollaborative.org.au/QPR.

CARE TO QPR CAMPAIGN | NEWS

mental health literacy among young people and teaching them the skills necessary for coping with adverse life events and stress, so that they get help before reaching crisis point.”

Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety are increasing for young people, Dr Tye said.

Each year about 90 school-aged children (4 to 17 years) die by suicide. Death by suicide increases markedly in the 17 to 25 year age group, with youth suicide (12 to 25 years) accounting for 14 per cent of deaths nationally.

“YAM focuses on mental health broadly, and there’s also a targeted suicide component,” Dr Tye said.

“However we know that in young people there’s 100 to 200 suicide attempts per death, so it could be up to 18,000 people attempting suicide at school age. Suicidal thinking and self harm is even more prevalent – so YAM targets all those things.”

Melissa Cameron, based at Kanahooka High School, has co-ordinated the roll-out of the YAM program to the region’s schools.

“It aims to challenge students’ negative perceptions and equip them with strategies to help each other in times of need,” she said.

“Help-seeking behaviour is also promoted, with strategies and information in the booklet ensuring the students are well prepared to reach out for support when they need it.”

She said the five-session program actively involved students. “In the YAM program, youth are considered experts of their own mental health and their voices and experiences take centre stage,” Ms Cameron said.

“Role-play and reflection stands at the core of the program as the students play out and discuss a wide variety of feelings, solutions and outcomes.”

“YAM helps students to realise that they have choices when faced with difficult situations by exploring problem solving, and encourages solidarity and strategies to help peers in need.”

Students had told her they had valued being able to talk openly and honestly about mental health and suicide in a confidential and safe environment.

Edmund Rice College principal Peter McGovern said YAM had offered a practical way for students to learn about issues that could be difficult to talk about.

“In the age we live in more and more schools are looking for opportunities around mental health, particularly around resilience building and suicide prevention,” he said.

“Year 9 students are the perfect age for this program, as adolescence is an emotional time where there’s some uncertainty and awkwardness.”

About 11 per cent of suicide deaths in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven occur in the 12 to 25 year age group.

Young Australians are more likely to take their own life than die in motor vehicle accidents.

Suicide is still the leading cause of death for Australians aged children (4 to 17 years) are increasing for young people.

Mental Health (YAM) programme is also promoted, with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative.

FACTS ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE

Shoalhaven schools, have completed the program.

Dr Tye said: “Maybe those girls saw me struggling. ”

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After the cruise plus at each port... 

Dealt with mental health issues for over a decade, Ms Clark said. “Diagnosed with Asperger’s when he was a child, he struggled to fit in at school and later started using pot to ease his anxiety. But it only exacerbated his issues and he suffered a drug-induced psychosis at 21 and spent time at Shellharbour Hospital’s psychiatric ward.”

“After that, and with the help of mental health professionals, I nursed him through two bouts of catatonia - he wouldn’t speak, he wouldn’t eat, he wouldn’t move.”

“The third time he became catatonic, he needed to spend additional time at Shellharbour Hospital.”

When he returned home, he seemed well on the way to recovery. He started, and completed, TAFE courses; he was engaging with family and friends and his GP was comfortable enough to decrease his medication.

“He did everything that was asked of him by health professionals, he improved out of sight,” Ms Clark said. “Then we noticed changes in him again. His body, his brain, just started to let him down. His medication was increased, but a few days later he took his own life. That was 22 months ago, and it doesn’t get any easier.”

It does give the Ulladulla couple compassion for others - those struggling with mental illness and suicidal thoughts, and the loved ones trying to care for them. “Suicide is like a pebble in the water – it ripples out and effects so many people in the family and the community,” Ms Clark said. “What I’d say to families, to friends, is to not shy away from it. To educate yourself as much as you can, to seek help for yourself so you can support your loved one.”

Ms Clark is a member of a group to seek funding to improve safety measures at the public place where her son took his life. Where others have also taken their lives. Where he was found.

“There needs to be barriers, and the area needs to be improved so people will go and enjoy the space, so it’s not a solitary, unfriendly space,” she said.

Ms Clark, a nurse, would like to see more training in mental health for health professionals - and their staff. “A lot of patients presenting to GPs have mental health issues, and staff need to be kind and non-judgmental.”
The community too, needs to be educated to stop the stigma around mental illness and suicide. “It’s such a hidden problem in the community because of the stigma,” Ms Clark said. “It’s not a palatable subject for people to discuss – although I think that is changing.”

She urged people to complete the QPR: Question, Persuade, Refer online training course: “The more education there is, the more tolerance and understanding.”

The Mercury, along with the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative, started a campaign to get more residents trained in suicide prevention through QPR in July. Details at www.suicidepreventioncollaborative.org.au/QPR.

Collaborative regional manager Dr Alex Hains said this had led to a “massive upswing” of people doing the course. “The more people across our communities that have done this training, the more people who are able to help each other,” he said.

Dr Hains, and the Mercury, thank all those who have taken part. “It’s been fantastic to have people share their own experiences of suicide and recovery in the campaign stories, and their messages of hope and encouragement are really powerful,” he said.

“We hope the campaign has let anyone out there who is struggling know they’re not alone, that there is help available, and they can recover.”

The third time he attempted to take his own life, “in hindsight perhaps it was the right decision,” Ms Clark said. “What I’d say to others is to seek help in any way they can.”

The campaign is in line with the recommendations of the Black Dog Institute’s report “Beyond the Swing” which highlighted the number of people who are struggling to access help.

“Also, myths or misconceptions about suicide can lead to discriminatory beliefs, such as people who attempt suicide are just attention-seeking. That doesn’t evoke the compassion and care that should be our response.”

To measure stigma towards suicide in our communities, the Black Dog Institute has started to conduct an annual survey of people’s attitudes and beliefs.

Some misconceptions highlighted in the 2018 survey include the fact one in 10 women, and two in 10 men, said that people who have thoughts about suicide should not tell others about it. Twenty per cent of respondents believed that most people who suicide are psychotic.

Dr Hains said these type of views were dangerous – for instance seeking help is vital, while more than a third of people who suicide do not have a mental health condition.

Meantime 20 per cent of survey respondents stated that once a person is suicidal, they will always be suicidal.

Almost half believed that people who talk about suicide rarely kill themselves.

“These responses suggest that people think there is no scope for recovery, which there clearly is,” Dr Hains said, “and it means they’re not alert to warning signs.”

LifeSpan strategy is helping to save lives

TWELVE: months on from the launch of the Black Dog Institute’s LifeSpan project in the region, key players and community members will come together to celebrate its achievements.

The celebration event will be held at the Kiama Pavilion from 8.30am to 10.30am next Thursday, to coincide with national R U OK Day.

It’s an important milestone for LifeSpan, which is led in this region by the Illawarra Shoalhaven Suicide Prevention Collaborative.

“We encourage anyone from the community to come along as it’ll give them a really great sense of all that is happening in suicide prevention as well as some ideas on how they can get involved,” Dr Alex Hains, regional manager of the Collaborative, said.

Suicide rates in the region remain higher than the state average, with around 40 to 60 suicide deaths each year over the past decade.

The Collaborative was formed in 2015 to reduce suicide deaths and attempts, and it brings together around 40 organisations from various sectors.

“The region then became one of four trial sites in NSW for LifeSpan, the nation’s largest integrated suicide prevention program. Achievements include the introduction of a new service to support people who present to emergency departments after a suicide attempt, and help them to connect with community-based supports.

The Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) program has also been rolled out to over 3700 Year 9 students across 26 public, Catholic and independent schools.

Meantime StepCare screening is gradually being introduced into general practices, which involves everyone who attends a GP appointment being screened for depression, anxiety, substance use, and suicidality.

“We will continue to work with the Black Dog Institute and other organisations to improve the supports available to people across our region, and work to ensure these supports are effective,” Dr Hains said.

“Suicide continues to have a really devastating impact on our communities. And so the Collaborative remains committed to involving the whole community to address this issue.”

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

– LISA WACHSMUTH