The Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health

TRANSCRIPT

REMARKS

LAUNCH OF THE LIFE IN MIND ONLINE SUICIDE PREVENTION PORTAL AND NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS CHARTER

MELBOURNE

E&OE...

GREG HUNT:
Thanks very much to Jaelea, to you, and to everybody at Everymind for everything you do. Ultimately you give people a sense of hope. You give people a sense of care and give them a path to better treatment and to feeling as if they belong and as if there is support for them. To Leilani, thank you for your welcome and introduction. To have the Indigenous voice on a day like today is doubly important, obviously, as an acknowledgment to country, but as a recognition of the challenge that so many people in Indigenous Australia face with issues regarding mental health and also, of course, suicide, where the rates are higher than the national average, which of course is an unacceptably high average and doubly so in the case of Indigenous Australia.

Now to all of you here today, we have so many different groups represented, whether it’s beyondblue, Lifeline, Mental Health Australia, headspace. All of the different constituent parts, R U OK?, of our magnificent community-led ground-up approach to mental health in Australia. I really have two things that I want to talk about. One is our common task and our common challenge and two is the pathway forward as represented by both the portal and the charter, but also the work of Mental Health Commissioner.

Today is ultimately about saving lives and protecting lives. That is what today is about and that is our common ground. We know that our challenge in mental health is that four million Australians every year do with some sort of mental health condition, whether it's chronic or episodic, anxiety or depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, eating disorders, suicidality. We also know that that therefore translates to approximately 3000 people who take their own lives every year and each one of those is a tragedy.

Each one of those represents a loss of potential and a loss to that person but also a ripple effect that flows through families, through friendship groups, through communities and as I've seen in places such as Grafton, are often catastrophic things through schools. So this is about the next great step as a country, as a community, in providing a pathway forward to give people an alternative, to give them a sense that they are cared for.

Already, together, in the last year, we’ve helped develop the Fifth National Mental Health Plan and Suicide Prevention Plan and we very specifically brought suicide prevention into that plan after it being excluded because we wanted to deal with it and to talk about the challenge and problem.

Many in the community and many in the media and many in the different professions wonder how do we talk about suicide and the answer, which has set out so well in this National Communications Charter, is we do talk about it, but we neither stigmatise it nor glamorise it. And so it’s about common sense and if we can talk about it, we can give people a sense that they don’t have to hide their own thoughts and their own feelings.

If people know that it is okay to seek help, to talk about it, it makes an immense difference. It may not solve everything but in many ways, it’s the indispensable first step. So to be able to know that if you seek help, to know that what you are experiencing is common and indeed, in so many situations, normal, allows people to have that sense of space. And I know when I was growing up and because my own family, my own mother’s experience, we never talked about it and we never discussed mental health and yet, we knew as a family.

And so the treatment that was needed was never properly sought. And yet I see the work of Everymind, beyondblue, and headspace, and MATES In Construction and so many others who are represented here today, you are providing that space now and that work is immensely important in giving people the opportunity.

So, we then translated the work of the Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan to the Budget, where there’s a $338 million investment in mental health, really across three fronts. One, suicide prevention, the support for Lifeline and the immediate needs that people have in the dark moments of the night or where they are at a moment of absolute crisis and the support for recovery through beyondblue’s Way Back program. Something that I was deeply engaged in and passionate and Georgie knew, and Julia Gillard and others have played such an important role.

This is about giving people literally what the name says – a way back, after they have hospitalised for suicidality, they have attempted suicide, they have been through a catastrophic process in their own life and the aftercare for them has not been as strong as it should be. So that- the support for our older Australians who actually have the highest rate of suicide, the older males over the age of 85 have the highest rate of suicide in the country.

And often it’s loneliness and isolation with no sense of anywhere to turn. And to be able to provide that contact through the mental health nurses and community support and in residential care can make such an immense difference. And then the 10-year- for the first time ever, a 10-year National Million Minds Mental Health Mission under the Medical Research Future Fund to look at clinical challenges and the treatment, and to build the pathway over the course of a decade for a million people to seek better help or help where they have no previously had help.

So those are the things we’ve done. Today though is about three new steps forward. Firstly, it’s about the Everymind Life in Mind portal, which we’ve supported with $1.5 million. But I am delighted, that together with so many people with lived experience, who I honour today and acknowledge, they have helped design this portal so as Everymind can make everybody to seek the help that they need. And that means that they can learn about the resources that are available, they can understand the challenge, they can understand the steps and pathway that they can take to help either themselves or to help somebody else.

Secondly, there is this magnificent National Communications Charter and it’s not a document to sit on the shelf. It’s to help all of us understand how we talk about suicide and mental health. And really, it comes down to two principles - common sense and respect. And that means we neither denigrate nor glamorise. And so we talk about suicide, but not highlight how something is happening. We acknowledge the fact and in many cases, it’s important to ask people - does this mean that you’re thinking that your life isn’t worth living? Does this mean if you see somebody in a situation where you believe, or it’s clear that there is a sign that they’re facing a deeper crisis, and that by asking, you can find that they have a way forward. You can help them and that’s really what the charter says.

The charter says it’s okay to ask if you are in a crisis yourself, and it’s okay to ask if you think somebody is having a crisis. And that is a very, very important message. In other words, it’s about reaching out and that’s what we have to do. And so I am delighted to officially launch both the National Communications Charter for a unified approach to mental health and suicide prevention, and the Life in Mind Portal today.

And I’m also delighted to do a third thing and to indicate that we’re adding four new members to the National Mental Health Commission. It’s obviously chaired, as Jaelea said, by the extraordinary Lucy Brogden, and Lucy has sent her best wishes, but Professor Maree Teeson will join the council. Maree is one of Australia’s leading experts on the relationship between mental health and substance abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, something that affects so many different parts of Australia but is critical to the issues here.

Kerry Hawkins, who is the leader of the Western Australian Mental Health Association and is a carer representative and has such an important role. Christina McGuffie, who has been both a journalist, a carer, and is a consumer, having had post-natal depression over two decades ago, and battled with many of the challenges whilst being a policy professional, well known to myself. And finally, Rabbi Kastel from Jewish House in Sydney, who has worked in the homelessness space and we know that the comorbidities of substance abuse and mental health are so linked to homelessness both as cause and effect. So all of these things come together.

So this new board will incidentally be over three-quarters female. We are, in the health area, very fortunate to have some extraordinary leaders who are women and I’m finding that many of our boards are now well over 50 per cent in terms of female participation and that’s always a moment of great delight. But above all else, it’s about finding the best people for the job. So with that, the Life in Mind Portal is launched, the charter is launched and the new Mental Health Commission is launched. Thank you very much.

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