



The Centre of Best Practice in  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander Suicide Prevention

Media Release

25 March 2019

## **Indigenous Leaders Call Australian Governments to Action on Indigenous Child and Youth Suicide**

The Centre of Best Practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention (CBPATSISP) was established by the Australian Government to help reduce the causes, prevalence and impact of suicide on Indigenous individuals, families and communities. In November 2018, CBPATSISP hosted two Indigenous-specific suicide prevention conferences in Perth that brought together 500 delegates from the national and international Indigenous communities to identify solutions that work in Indigenous suicide prevention.

The delegates called Australian governments to action: to declare, and respond to, Indigenous suicide rates, including child and youth suicide rates, as a national crisis. The importance and relevance of their call is only reinforced by recent events. Four Queensland children and young people between 15 and 23 years old have taken their lives in the past fortnight. This adds to a spate of child deaths in Adelaide and Western Australia only months before. CBPATSISP Director Professor Pat Dudgeon commented:

*There is something especially shocking about the suicide of a child for whom life was just beginning. CBPATSISP believe that like proverbial 'canaries in coal-mines', our children are reacting to elements in their environment, and what is happening to our children contains a message for Australian society. While short and medium-term action is absolutely necessary and required of us, long-term action to address the traumatic, disrupting and intergenerational effects of colonisation and its aftermath, including poverty and social exclusion - the deep-rooted causes of Indigenous suicide, and child suicide - must also begin.*

*Short term action is that Indigenous children and young people in crisis situations are identified and provided immediate help. At a recent CBPATSISP co-hosted Brisbane workshop, proactively monitoring the social media activity of children for signs of suicidal ideation was reported to be effective in preventing suicide in one community.*

*Medium-term action should build on the findings of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP), the precursor to CBPATSISP. In particular, communities must be empowered to co-design and control responses and our community strengths must be recognised. ATSISPEP evaluated establishing peer-to-peer mentoring networks and programs; programs to engage children and young people, including sporting programs; and connecting them to Elders and culture, as successful and effective ways of preventing Indigenous child and youth suicide.*

Overall, the CBPATSISP conferences' delegates called for a dedicated National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy and fully-funded Implementation Plan



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in the medium term with a focus on preventing child and youth suicide. Professor Dudgeon adds:

*The 2013 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy is a solid and comprehensive response to Indigenous suicide, and its principles remain current. However, it needs adapting it to the current policy environment, particularly to account for the role of Primary Health Networks in the mental health system. It is critical that Indigenous people continue with a dedicated suicide prevention plan that accounts for our cultural and experiential differences, and that is not subsumed into a mainstream strategy. The renewed strategy should also focus on empowering communities to respond to suicide; increasing the Indigenous suicide prevention workforce to levels commensurate with need, and supporting our community controlled health services to deliver an integrated range of responses to suicide.*

Delegates also called for a broader Australian recovery and healing process based on truth-telling that recognises and addresses the events and impacts of colonisation and its present-day aftermath of intergenerational trauma, disadvantage, marginalisation and neglect that can lead to suicide. Professor Dudgeon commented:

*Indigenous suicide is different because it cannot be separated from the historical and related present-day situation of our peoples. Truth is the basis for healing and moving forward. In particular, Elders attending the conferences recommended a Royal or 'Truth and Reconciliation' Commission as the foundation of this process.*

*Our communities and cultures are sources of identity, values and practices that can help protect against suicide. Such strengths provide the foundation for a mix of short, medium, and longer-term action in the face of increasing Indigenous child and youth suicide deaths, and that is required to turn this tragic situation around.*

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- For more information about CBPATSISP see <https://www.cbpatsisp.com.au/>
- For more information about ATSIPEP see: <https://www.atsispep.sis.uwa.edu.au/>
- Please look at the LOVE and HOPE campaign page at <https://www.cultureislife.org/campaign/love-hope/>
- For media enquiries and interview requests, please contact Ms Barb Ahmat on 0424 433 429
- Available for media – Professor Pat Dudgeon
- For more information on the appropriate reporting of mental illness and suicide see the Mindframe website: [www.mindframe.org.au](http://www.mindframe.org.au)
- Lifeline: 131 114



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- Kids Helpline: 1800 551 800
- Mensline: 1300 78 99 78