

Prevention in Practice Summit 2023 reflection

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My imposter syndrome kicks into overdrive at such events but is quickly overridden by my passion and drive to be a part of changing the system and how we deal with suicide prevention.

I come from a blue-collar background and left school at 15. I was too preoccupied with survival to study much so to be in a room with such people can be very daunting, but I really do have something to say. I have decided to give my reflection in four smaller parts to correspond with things that resonated for me in each of the sessions.

Taking action on the social and commercial determinants of mental health

I'm still staggered by the power that alcohol, gambling and junk food have, and the influence they have on things such as research. The poorest and most at risk are shamelessly targeted.

I have tried to end my life several times and every time I was drunk. Alcohol is legally available and socially acceptable but has no place in anything to do with suicide prevention and mental health in my view.

When you attend big prevention functions and galas the first thing you are often handed is a glass of wine. But this can be almost insulting to someone like me that has struggled with drugs and alcohol my entire life.

I reflect deeply on my own childhood and how childhood maltreatment set a course for me, with very little support. I can count seven major traumas even before even my mother's suicide when I was 15 and feel it is only by chance that I am here to write this today.

Parental support is so fundamental. Educating and supporting parents, whatever their situation and background, is such an obvious way to save people like me. I feel that my mother was essentially left to die by the system and this same system left me, a traumatised 15-year-old child, to go it alone.

Has anything changed today? I suggest not a lot as my son also died by suicide in 2019 and I was left to fend for myself again.

What do I think could help?

- Identify parents in need of help early.
- Ban alcohol and gambling advertising at all levels.
- Educate, educate, educate. The entire community must play a role in prevention at all levels. Teach them how to do so.

Implementing prevention in practice across systems and sectors

I was astonished to hear about the amount of research that is simply not being used. This must chew up vast amounts of money and also vast amounts of lived experience energy. This must be addressed

somehow. We tire of reports sitting on politician desks only to have yet another dusty report dumped on top with a change of government. Taking action must be the focus.

Some of the key things in this session that stood out for me included the following:

- Help caregivers care! I was so pleased to hear this as they do so much unsupported work and save so many lives. Supporting the supporters better must be a priority!
- As a small business owner for many years, I see many gaps here. I was in the construction industry, and while organisations like Mates are doing a lot of work here, it doesn't reach contractors and smaller organisations. I think needs to be addressed to ensure a focus on small businesses.
- An average of 17 years between research and implementation is an absolute disgrace and must be urgently addressed. We have approximately 3,300 people dying by suicide each year, so 17 years equals 56,610 deaths. As someone with lived experience why would I even bother to participate in research?
- Living in a regional centre the difficulty in accessing services is very real to me. We plead to people to go and see their GP, but they are simply not available and if we do see one if we do not connect again the options are gone. A 15-minute appointment is not long enough to gain someone's trust and have them talk about their suicidality. We need to get real with this if we are serious about helping people. Not enough is being done to support our doctors and first responders who are also dying.
- I was not surprised to hear that only 10 per cent of Royal Commission findings are implemented. It points again to political failure and money wasted.

Connecting whole of government and whole of community

I love the question in this session about where we are sourcing the funding from and feel we must look very closely at this. Personally, the carrot of funds for community suicide prevention events from alcohol companies has been dangled in front of me but it feels ethically and morally wrong.

Some other points that stood out to me in this session included the following:

- Why does every state and territory not have a dedicated suicide prevention portfolio? I feel it should have its own portfolio separate to mental health, along with government-funded lived experience advisory groups (LEAGs) advising on suicide prevention in addition to mental health focused LEAGs.
- We all have mental health. Sometimes it is good sometimes it is not good, and we must continue to crush the stigma around the topic.
- I think we can spend our prevention dollars so much better. Early community interventions and grassroots initiatives are working better. Often run by volunteers with lived experience they are stepping up to fill the gaps that the experts fail to see.
- Basic housing, good food, clean water and keeping kids in school undoubtably save lives but are often not prioritised.
- Social prescribing, I love it. A prescription to validate being human!

A question was asked "how do we keep momentum going"? I think part of the answer is by investing in lived experience. Not just through LEAGs but by identifying and employing people with lived experience to step

up and became real players in this arena. Train us and invest in us. We are highly hyper-motivated to do this work. Many of us struggle financially so studying full-time or even part-time is a real difficulty. We are not a tokenistic choice, but a vast untapped workforce and huge source of knowledge, which I encourage the sector to begin to use to its fullest extent.

Building and delivering impact

Since the death of my mother in 1985 I can't see too much has changed. As Doctor Carbone said, "We are spending more and getting less." I think some feel that by giving big money to big organisations their prevention duties are done.

I have always been dismayed by the competition in the sector. While I understand it, this mentality must somehow be quashed. It is absolutely a team game and requires us all to work together to fight it properly.

The government must step up at every level in a coordinated long-term strategy. Bipartisan support regardless of political party must happen and work closely with philanthropic agencies. Can you imagine what could happen if we did that?

In summary

As someone with lived experience I feel so very let down by the system

The experts were not there when my mother, a nurse, took her life. They were not there when my grandfather, a veteran from WW2, took his life. They were not there when my son, an apprentice chef, took his life. They were not there when I tried to end my life. When I reached out for help, I was threatened with being forced onto the very drug that helped to kill my mother. All three funerals and not one expert in sight.

Do not be scared to innovate and change things because based on my experience what we have been doing has not worked. If I ran my plumbing business this way, I would have gone broke.

We all have a role to play and when the researchers, clinicians, and people like me with lived experience all work together we will reduce the suicide rates. It is up to us to all work together to hold our political leaders to account. Invest more in the grassroots nonclinical support that is working and doing what many do not have the courage to do.

I wish to finish by reminding everyone that my family is not just a statistic. Lorrain my mother was failed by the system. George my grandfather was failed as was my precious boy, Alex. This system has failed me on so many occasions I could not list them all.

Embrace lived experience because our stories are powerful and loud, and when we combine together we will become a roar and bring about the change that is so desperately needed.

Please never lose site of the humanity in all of this and please step up. I'm so very tired of burying my loved ones after death by suicide.