

National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy Communication Project

As part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Commonwealth Government engaged the Australian Institute of Family Studies to address the information and communication needs of those involved in youth suicide prevention. The major activity undertaken in this area during 1999–2000 was the evaluation of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy.

Evaluation

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care to evaluate the \$31 million National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, which ran from 1995 to 1999. Terms of reference of the evaluation were to: determine the extent to which the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy achieved its goals or developed and initiated activities which achieve objectives directly related to those goals; and develop recommendations to inform the government, particularly the Minister for Health and Aged Care, about future national youth suicide prevention policy development.

The evaluation report has been completed and is currently being prepared for publication in five volumes. The main overview report, *Valuing Young Lives: Evaluation of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy*, sets out what the Strategy achieved and what was learned from the Strategy as a whole. It includes administration, policy context, conceptual basis, and a description of activities within each of the main approaches adopted by the Strategy, and it presents the evaluation methodology and a summary of major achievements and good practice findings.

Detailed information about what was achieved and learned by projects within each of the particular approaches adopted by the Strategy is presented in a series of supplementary technical reports. These reports present the results of a comprehensive qualitative meta-analysis (or meta-evaluation) of the evaluation reports of the National Demonstration Projects funded under the Strategy.

Communications strategy

The following communications activities were conducted during 1999–2000.

Subscriber based internet discussion list

The Institute supports a subscriber-based Internet discussion list to facilitate information sharing between researchers and service planners and providers. There have been 662 messages from 217 subscribers since the list's inception in May 1998. The list is well established, with regular traffic and interesting contributions from professionals in the field.

Public internet site

A Youth Suicide Prevention Web site is now well developed and is continually updated as new information becomes available. The site is attracting a high and steeply rising number of visits – 68,147 during 1999 and 72,275 during the first half of 2000. The site contains the most recent available information on the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, the stocktake databases, recently published research, crisis contact details, mailing list details, statistics, forthcoming conferences, links to related sites, and other relevant information.

Project extension

The Communications Project has recently been extended. Its objective is to continue to provide a communications/clearinghouse service to suicide prevention stakeholders.

In particular, the project aims to provide a knowledge base from which to inform policy, practice and research in suicide prevention by maintaining a collection of,

and providing access to: resources on the latest developments in the prevention of suicide and ancillary topics; bibliographic databases based on this collection of information and resources; a database of suicide prevention programs derived from the two Stocktakes of Youth Suicide Prevention Activities; information generated by the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy; and information about forthcoming suicide prevention activities, in particular those funded by the Commonwealth Government.

The Communications Project also aims to draw on this knowledge base to support clients by providing communications and clearinghouse activities in the form of: print publications; electronic publications and a Web site; an information/advisory service; and conference papers. It will promote client networking by developing and maintaining a mailing list of people concerned with suicide prevention, and an electronic discussion list.

External evaluation

The Communications Project was evaluated by Dr Bryan Tanney, an international authority on suicide. Dr Tanney's report concluded with the following observations:

'The National Communications Project developed and trialed a series of programs and products in diverse communication formats for informing a focused audience about suicide and its prevention. The demand for these materials surpassed all expectations, but appears to have been met in a timely and organized fashion by the staff of the Australia Institute of Family Studies. Appropriate subscribers were recruited in a focused approach with direct "word of mouth" and endorsement very important. The subscription list tapped potential user groups in both nodes of the information cascade and sectors of service interest in expected proportions. The largest group, providers of direct services to individuals and communities, had within it many persons also offering

education and training functions. The diversity of subscribers was reflected in the extremes of their special interests and is a reflection of the heterogeneity of the entire field of suicide and its prevention.

'Acquiring knowledge was a substantial priority over either information and networking. It was also regarded as more important than information sharing either within or across sectors of interest and affiliation. Research and information generators were more satisfied with the programs and products than the service provider group, with the National Stocktakes especially disappointing in their penetration and usage by the latter group. The project validated the information cascade model which was used to rationalize it and also accomplished some of the expectations set by the funding sponsor in an initial Memorandum of Understanding concerning outcomes. However, transmission of specific content was not the primary objective or focus of the project nor were changes in consumer's clinical skills and community practices realistically to be expected from the program operations available through this project.

'The largest majority of users valued and endorsed the continuation of all aspects of this project. Beyond blanket endorsements, some differentiation of value was attained for various audiences and programs. Although the paper format of the YSP Bulletin was still the most endorsed communication modality, it was timely and appropriate to invest in cross-media publication and in the program operations dedicated to electronic/computer based communication. Problems of access for many service providers are diminishing rapidly and "computer literacy", and "internet familiarity" are now an expectation for the target population of service provider. Although the lack of interaction and sharing within and across sectors was disappointing, this remains

a strongly identified need by direct-service field workers. The information cascade model is an evolving model for true information and knowledge exchange and is only unidirectional in its earliest stage. In later stages, users select information to build their own bridges and connecting links as needed.

'The National Communications Project succeeded beyond expectations. It has established and demonstrated the infrastructure for an 'information highway'. Further efforts at providing and exchanging knowledge, information and resources concerning suicide prevention in Australia are valued and needed.'