

It's time for action: do something to help

Jeff Kennett

IN 1997, while I was the Premier of Victoria, I was challenged by my daughter to do something to stop young country men dying on our roads.

Further investigation of the two deaths that caused my daughter to cry out her challenge found that, while both young men's deaths were recorded as road fatalities, both men were depressed and had used their motor vehicles to take their own lives.

Hence began a journey that led me to consider better suicide prevention programs — until I realised suicide prevention programs were too late in the process.

Talking about mental illness was rejected by most of the community, but the word depression had a much wider acceptance. My advocacy for a national body to destigmatise depression took shape in July 2000 when I became the Inaugural Chairman of The National Depression Initiative, which became *beyondblue*.

Like others in the community, I had developed a growing awareness of the significant social and economic burden of depression — and its insidious contribution to the growing number of suicides each year. I believed that the bipartisan approach of *beyondblue* has the potential to provide some much needed solutions.

Throughout our first 5 years, *beyondblue* worked tirelessly to raise awareness of depression and combat the stigma associated with the illness. Our projects tackle depression in a range of settings and across the lifespan. These include postnatal depression, depression in young people, older people, indigenous communities, rural areas, schools and workplaces.

Jeff Kennett, Chairman

beyondblue: the national depression initiative, Melbourne, VIC.

Correspondence: Jeff Kennett, *beyondblue: the national depression initiative*, PO Box 6100, Hawthorn West, VIC 3122.
bb@beyondblue.org.au

As an independent, not for profit, national organisation, *beyondblue* reaches beyond party politics and competing sectors and policies, delivering important information about depression across all states and territories, local communities and throughout rural Australia. Today every state and territory government is a contributing paid-up stakeholder and *beyondblue* recently commenced its second 5-year term with increased funding from the Federal Government.

Just as we have destigmatised AIDS and breast cancer through research, transparency and education, so too are we breaking down the stigma associated with depression and mental illnesses. Now we are seeing an increasing groundswell, taking mental health issues to a political level. This is because of the unaddressed urgent need for a safer health system and the need for major reforms across all states and territories.

Currently, there is limited access to preventive and acute care; little continuity of care and almost no availability of rehabilitation services. People are committing drastic acts in order to get into care and the rates of suicide are often too high following discharge. In short, there is currently no reliable universal system for treating this acute, life-affecting illness.

For too long, mental health has been the ugly duckling within the health suite. The issues with depression and mental illness are community-based and political — in part because historically no community, community leader or political party has consistently championed mental illness over a significant period of time. This is also partly because of the stigma attached to the illnesses and because they are so often not seen and not considered to be a health priority, unlike breast cancer or diabetes — but I do think that change is taking place.

Substantial increases in funding are required to progress Australia's mental health reforms.

The three areas that desperately need attention are:

- Early screening and intervention programs — especially among young people, but also throughout the wider community;
- Better access to a broader range of professional help; and
- Provision of a greater variety of accommodation options for people suffering varying degrees of illness and in different stages of recovery.

In addition, community awareness and destigmatisation programs are essential, particularly those aimed at men, indigenous and rural communities and elderly Australians.

At the Senate Inquiry into Mental Health in 2005, as Chairman of *beyondblue*, I said I believe that strong national leadership is required to drive mental health reforms. We need a national, integrated approach led by a small, independent, bipartisan body. We need national goals and targets, standards, legislation and maintenance of effort across sectors.

With mental health being high on the agenda at the recent Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting, it's evident that serious consideration of mental health has finally arrived. I am optimistic that the report to be returned to COAG by mid year will recommend some exciting changes — together with a substantial lift in financial resources in the years to come.

With the exception of private health insurance — which the Federal Government encourages us to take out through its subsidy of our premiums — the basic approach to health, as a policy issue in this country, is one of reacting to illnesses. In short, federal and state governments spend billions of dollars each year on our behalf providing resources to treat illnesses.

As a community, why do we not spend considerable amounts of money trying to find better ways to prevent illnesses? I am sure many cases of physical and mental illness, including depression, could be prevented as a result of proactive, consistent, well financed programs. It would take 5 years plus before the benefits became apparent, but I believe the social and financial benefits would be enormous.

We should embark on a national healthy lifestyle program with a focus on wellness and wellbeing, using the evaluated health agents of regular exercise, diet, nutrition, and lifestyle education delivered through a federally coordinated program — not by myriad disparate groups conducting their own. I suggest this would provide Australia with long-term illness and suicide prevention on a large scale, assisting to reduce the alarming 2020 predictors for depression and other chronic illnesses.

I do not think it is a difficult challenge. It simply requires that governments give mental health a higher priority of policy and funding; and have the willingness to do some things differently in the future, based on what we have learnt over the last few years.

The community's challenge to government today is just the same as my daughter's plea was to me back in 1997. Do something to help. It's time for action.

These are important times for constructive mental health reform in Australia and for *beyondblue*. I look forward to continuing our work with governments, the health sector, our community partners and, importantly, the people living with the illness, to assist us to further open eyes to depression across Australia.

Finally, make sure you stay well, by looking after your own health first. □