

## Media Release

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### **Suicide rate soars among mentally ill**

#### **400 per cent increase in suicide among people with schizophrenia provokes call for change**

A report released **today** highlighting an alarming 400 per cent increase in the rate of suicide amongst people with schizophrenia over the past 40 years<sup>1</sup> has prompted a call for the reassessment of funding and resources for the care of the mentally ill.

According to Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia, "It is disturbing to discover that 84 per cent of Australians with schizophrenia who died last year took their own lives<sup>2</sup>. This tragedy will continue unless greater emphasis is placed on supported accommodation, rehabilitation and access to effective treatment in the community.

"The report highlights a dangerous void in the treatment of people with mental illness. Currently, we have a situation where one third of all people with schizophrenia still receive older medication with distressing and disabling side-effects, nearly two-thirds do not receive any psychological treatment and fewer than one-in-five attend rehabilitation programs.<sup>3</sup>

"This is inexcusable given the report's conclusion that people with schizophrenia are 12 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population<sup>4</sup>," said Ms Hocking.

The report, commissioned by SANE Australia, entitled '*Schizophrenia Costs: An analysis of the burden of schizophrenia and related suicide in Australia*' paints a picture of spiralling social and economic costs directly linked to a growing number of people with schizophrenia 'living on the edge' of effective treatment and care.

Professor Vaughan Carr, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Newcastle and a major contributor to the report claims that of the 200,000 Australians who will be affected by schizophrenia,<sup>5</sup> one-in-six are likely to take their own lives<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, more than 40 per cent of people with schizophrenia will attempt suicide at least once and a further 70 per cent contemplate ending their lives on a regular basis.<sup>7</sup>

According to Professor Carr, “The key to reducing the suicide rate amongst people with schizophrenia, as well as the profound suffering and costly disability of the illness, is a combination of early diagnosis of the illness and ongoing treatment and support in the community, particularly following discharge from psychiatric care.

“The highest risk of suicide amongst people with schizophrenia is within a year-or-two of symptom onset<sup>8</sup>, however, the majority of people with the illness experience significant delay between symptom development and treatment.

“Furthermore, people with schizophrenia are especially vulnerable to suicide and thoughts of suicide directly after discharge from a hospital or mental health clinic,” he said.

Ms Hocking added, “Many people with schizophrenia live either in social isolation or the burden for their care falls on family members who in many instances themselves need support and education,” she said.

Lynne Pezzullo, health analyst, Access Economics, author of the report said, “People with schizophrenia and their carers are financially burdened, bearing over one third of all financial costs associated with the illness<sup>10</sup>. Given the fact that the majority of people with schizophrenia are unable to work due to the illness, this is a significant cost burden to them and their families.”

In 2001, the lost earnings from people unable to work due to schizophrenia was \$488 million, with a further \$88 million in carer costs<sup>11</sup>. For the same year, direct health systems costs were \$661 million, which represents over six times the spending on the average Australian’s health care<sup>12</sup>.

According to Ms Hocking, “Ongoing untreated and mistreated schizophrenia is extremely costly and will continue to impact on the projected cost of illness in Australia unless alternative action is taken.

“To protect the health system from a blow-out of more than one billion dollars in the next decade<sup>13</sup> and to allow people with schizophrenia a greater opportunity for a healthier life, it is essential that a well-resourced and coordinated program of community care is implemented. We need to support and replicate effective programs that do exist, so they are available to all who need them,” she claimed.

The report found that in Australia, schizophrenia (not including the impact of suicide) poses a greater health burden to the community than major diseases such as ovarian cancer, epilepsy, rheumatoid arthritis or HIV/AIDs, and is of similar magnitude to leukaemia and melanoma.<sup>14</sup>

The report was prepared for SANE Australia by Access Economics, in consultation with leading mental health specialists. It was funded by an unrestricted grant from Novartis Pharmaceuticals, who had no part in the direction, analysis or findings contained in the report.

**SANE Australia is a national charity helping people affected by mental illness. For information and referral on mental illness call SANE Helpline on 1800 688 382 or visit [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org).**

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**To arrange an interview or for further information, please contact Joanna Harrison (0401 592 609) or Jennifer Stojic (0410 621 063) at Professional Public Relations on (02) 9818 0986.**

**References:**

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