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Changes to the ABS Causes of Death Data

Changes to the ABS Causes of Death data about to be released today mean that media must be cautious if reporting on suicide statistics.

Peak Body for Mental Health in Queensland, Queensland Alliance CEO; and Board Member of the Mental Health Council of Australia, Jeff Cheverton, said despite statistical difficulties the media needed to continue to report on suicide.

"How much information should be revealed about individual cases is a difficult balance with ensuring that suicide doesn't become an unspoken taboo," he said.

"Although these statistical changes make it even more difficult to raise suicide in the media, we urge journalists not to leave suicide in the shadows, despite the challenges of reporting."

The ABS has advised that a change to causes of death data will occur in 2010.

The Mindframe National Media initiative, which provides advice to media and health professionals about portrayals of suicide and mental illness, has advised that the changes include two key features:

1. For the first time there will be a revision of previously released data (in this case 2007 data) to include subsequently closed coronial cases.

- In the first publication of the 2007 data (in March 2009) there was a case closure rate of 70% overall (varying from state to state).
- This revision process will continue from 2010 so that data from 2007 onwards is reviewed each year to reflect new case closures in an attempt to get more accurate data.

2. The ABS has introduced a new system for processing causes of death data to be reflected for the first time in the 2008 data.

- These changed processes are aimed at improving the quality of coding and the more accurate identification of deaths by suicide.
- These changes may mean that data from 2008 causes of death are no longer comparable to earlier years of data.

For more details about the changes, contact the ABS or visit www.abs.gov.au.

The Mindframe National Media initiative has produced a quick guide to reporting suicide that can be found at: www.mindframe-media.info

Karinya Louttit
Communications Manager
Queensland Alliance
07 3832 2600
0408764974

Jeff Cheverton
CEO
Queensland Alliance
07 3832 2600
0437544366