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The national emergency we can no longer ignore

By John Brogden

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Ten years ago today I sat in a bed at Royal North Shore Hospital sedated, bandaged, scheduled under the mental health act and under suicide watch.

The night before I had tried to kill myself.



"It is time to get angry and stay angry until we see suicides drop.": John Brogden. BRENDAN ESPOSITO

My successful nine-and-a-half year career in the NSW Parliament – elected at 27, Leader at 33 – had collapsed through my own failings and flaws. The shame had become overwhelming and I had convinced myself there was no other way out.

The only way – in my mind the best way – to take away the shame I had brought on myself, my family, my friends and my party was to take my own life.

I thank God I am still alive today. The immeasurable love and support of my wife, family and friends, two excellent doctors and countless nurses got me through a very dark time.

Three weeks after resigning the leadership and attempting suicide I resigned from Parliament. Despite the extraordinary wave of empathy, sympathy and support I knew I couldn't get well in the public eye. I just couldn't go back.

It took me over six months to recover. To get out of bed. To get dressed. To leave the house. To look people in the eye.

This is very hard to think about and even harder to write. But what happened to me happens to tens of thousands of Australians every year. The shame and hopelessness becomes overwhelming. Some think seriously about suicide. Others try. And over 2500 each year die. Seven a day.

In the 10 years since I tried to take my own life at least 23,500 Australians committed suicide. Worse, the number of people suiciding in Australia is increasing. In 10 years the number has increased by 20 per cent.

More people die from suicide than on our roads. Over the same period the number of motor vehicle deaths has reduced by 25 per cent to 1200.

What other cause of death would we allow to increase by 20 per cent over the last 10 years without serious action?

Suicide is the largest single cause of death in Australia for men and women under 44. Whilst we have come a very long way in destigmatising and talking openly about depression and other 'common' mental illnesses, we still struggle to know how to deal with suicide. Our suicide rates are similar to other Western developed nations such as the USA, UK and New Zealand. However, our Indigenous People's suicide rates are amongst the highest in the world.

Scotland is an example of a western country that has seen a decline in suicides after setting a target in 2002 to reduce suicide by 20 per cent within 10 years. They achieved an 18 per cent reduction.

Australia has failed to implement and fund a national suicide strategy.

So my call today is for suicide to be declared a national emergency. For it to be news every day that seven Australians took their own lives. For us to publish the suicide toll the way we publish the road toll. If we don't talk about suicide we can't stem the tide and reduce it.

It is time to get angry and stay angry until we see suicides drop. The commonwealth, state and territory governments must agree, implement and fund a national suicide strategy as a matter of urgency.

This year Lifeline will receive an extraordinary one million calls from Australians in crisis and at risk of suicide. Five years ago we received less than half that. Every day 120 callers are at high risk of suicide. Twenty times a day we assess the risk as

so high we keep the caller on the line and have emergency services trace the call and go to the scene. Our 52 year history of saving lives proves a compassionate ear from a stranger to a stranger saves lives.

Not everyone gets another chance in life. I have recovered from my suicide attempt and live a full and contributing life. I still have depression for which I am medicated and, like any other illness, I work with it every day.

Today I live by a credo from an unscripted speech delivered by Richard Nixon as he resigned in shame and controversy in 1974. It explains my journey.

"The greatness comes not when things go always good for you. The greatness comes when you're really tested. When you take some knocks, some disappointments. When sadness comes. Because only if you've been in the deepest valley can you know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain."

John Brogden was the NSW Leader of the Opposition from 2002 to 2005 and is the chairman of Lifeline Australia.

Lifeline, 13 11 14

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Kids Helpline 1800 551 800.