

11 September 2020

Dear Ms Buttrose,

I am writing to you to express my significant concern resulting from the airing of the Four Corners program on the 24th August titled 'Please Don't Judge Us'. Richmond Wellbeing has been providing mental health services in WA for 45 years and every year we support hundreds of individuals who experience severe and persistent mental distress. We were the first service provider in WA to provide residential services to assist the cohort of individuals described in the episode, those who are regularly admitted to hospital and have a diagnosis such as Schizophrenia.

I commend and support the endeavour of the ABC to highlight the need for more mental health services in our community. I also accept that there is a small percentage of homicides that occur at the hands of those experiencing mental distress. However, I believe that the story has resulted in several unintended negative consequences. The story infers that:

- Medications and hospitals are the only solution for people experiencing mental distress or hearing voices.
- People who hear voices or experiencing mental distress are inherently dangerous.
- In the community you may be unaware that you are in the company of 'very dangerous people with untreated mental illness'.

My greatest concern is the negative impact that this will have on the stigma of mental distress in our community. As a 38-year-old male and CEO of a Mental Health organisation I am very mindful that the leading cause of death of men aged 18-40 is suicide. RW provides support to hundreds of men in this age category every year and I invest considerable personal time to improve mental health awareness of men in this age group, especially in sporting groups. The stigma of mental health in men in my age group is so strong that so many men are unwilling to talk to their friends or family about their mental health, even if it's just mild anxiety or depression.

It may seem strange to those who have significant knowledge in mental health, but many men in Australia believe that their mild anxiety or depression will lead to schizophrenia or some form of severe and acute mental distress. This is a major barrier to men discussing their mental health and seeking the help that is readily available. As a father of three young boys this concerns me greatly as I think often about the world they are growing up in and what messages the media and the community sends them.

I appreciate and welcome the ABC supporting mental health week and initiatives to reduce suicide. However, these initiatives and the Four Corners report are simply not compatible. This program hinders the great work that has been done in our community over the years to reduce the stigma of mental health and encourage people to talk about mental health and seek support. I ask the ABC to please be more considered and balanced in the way they report stories of this nature.

I'm not sure if you saw the recent Insight episode on SBS that explored the topic of people who hear voices. It gave a completely different perspective to that of the ABC story. It focussed on the consumer experience and the evidence and research of working with the 'Hearing Voices Approach' and reduced stigma of mental distress.

This program is in stark contrast to your Four Corners program which we argue is also a significant setback to the consumer movement and the tremendous and courageous advocacy work they have done over the years. I noted that there were no consumers of mental health services interviewed for the episode, nor was a peak body or advocacy body contacted for comment. I recognise that family members were interviewed, but this is very different to the voice of lived experience of mental distress. I have been saddened to hear so many people in the community who access mental health services report to me the setback they feel this episode has provided. It only confirms their concerns that they are not welcome or trusted in their own community, simply because they live with severe and persistent mental distress.

It is also important to provide a well-informed perspective of the mental health service and its pressure points. Of course, we welcome better services for those experiencing severe mental health distress, but the program made no mention of the early intervention and prevention measures required to assist in preventing people reaching the more severe end of the spectrum. These services are severely underfunded in Australia and we urgently need increased investment in these. Speaking to consumers and peak bodies will highlight this need.

I ask the ABC to please consider the hurt and distress this story has caused and how this story can increase the stigma of mental health and work contrary to our endeavours to decrease suicide. In addition, we welcome the ABC to visit Richmond Wellbeing to hear the voice of consumers of mental health services and their experience.

Kind Regards,

Adrian Munro

CEO

Richmond Wellbeing

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