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How the gift of organ donation saved two young lives



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AGENDA

Kids innocent victims of suicide

In the grief and chaos after a parent takes their own life, children are often forgotten. A trial service to provide support is about to start

Angela Pownall



When Perth counsellor Kelly Riley calls someone because their spouse or partner has killed themselves, she often hears the sound of children in the background.

And it breaks her heart, not least because, until now, it hasn't been her job to help them.

It hasn't been anybody's specific job to help them. With the surviving parent and other family members often too grief-stricken to know what to do, children can be the forgotten victims of a parent's suicide.

"Doing that work, it came to our attention the need for

counselling for children and also group work for children. That need wasn't being met," Ms Riley, who works for support group Anglicare WA, said. "Also we were being asked by a lot of people; 'how do we talk to our children about this? What do we tell them?'"

Ms Riley will lead Australia's first specialist long-term support service for children bereaved by suicide, CYPRESS, when it begins operating in Perth next month.

Research has shown a child who loses a parent to suicide is three times more likely to take their own life.

Ms Riley, also a qualified youth worker, said it was quite common for a surviving parent or family members to tell a child their parent had died another way.

"They think it's their role as a parent to protect their children from that, so they might tell them a different

version of what's happened," she said.

But this can lead to a child feeling deceived when they find out the truth.

"If you believed your parent died of a heart attack or car accident, and you grew up believing that and then found out it was different, it would completely change the narrative in your mind," she said.

CYPRESS, which stands for Children & Young People Responsive Suicide Support, will offer children who have lost a parent or significant person to suicide counselling, psycho-education and group sessions with other children similarly affected.

Ms Riley said they also hoped to give surviving parents and other family members help in dealing with a child's grief.

Children aged eight to 16 will be able to use the service, for as many years as they need or want to, as they grow up

dealing with what happened.

Ms Riley said she believed the service, which will also go into family homes, was "so needed" that there would be plenty of families wanting to take part.

The WA Government revealed this month it is funding a three-year, \$720,000 trial of the service, which will operate in the Perth metropolitan area initially.

Mental Health Minister Andrea Mitchell said starting with the city-wide trial was necessary to ensure the model was effective and appropriate before it could expand to regional and remote areas.

"Evidence shows group-based support is the most effective for these children and young people, and the service will provide regular workshops in small groups by specialists in child development and grief counselling," she said.

The creation of the service has been driven by WA

Association for Mental Health president Alison Xamon, whose father took his own life when she was 11 years old.

"It's been a desperate need to try to make sense of what happened to me and to ensure that there is something in place for children in the future," she said.

The Rev. Alan Miller was 35 when he died in October 1980, leaving his wife and two children. Mr Miller, a Uniting Church minister in Perth's northern suburbs, had been experiencing depression for some time. Ms Xamon, a former WA Greens MP, said her father also left behind a lifetime of grief and trauma for her and her brother.

"Children relive the trauma of suicide throughout their life and childhood," she said.

"If you are only two when your parent suicides, you may not understand the full horror of that suicide until you are 12."

Ms Xamon, who is also on the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention which advises the State Government, has researched the impact of parental suicide on children for years.

She presented the data to the council and asked for WA to be the first in Australia to offer



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Kelly Riley, counsellor

TRAGIC TOLL

- Suicide is the leading cause of death of children between five and 17-years-old.
- In 2009, 9.9 per cent of all deaths of children aged five to 17 were due to suicide. By 2013, that number had risen to 19.3 per cent.
- Children and young people under the age of 18 who lose a parent to suicide are three times more likely to complete suicide than children and young people living with their parents.
- After the loss of a loved one to suicide children and young people often feel isolated and alienated from their peers, feel lonely, disconnected and, and do not enjoy the protective benefits of acceptance and peer group identification.

- Risk factors for suicide amongst children and young people can be biological, psychological, cognitive, and environmental and can include mental health conditions, a physical disability or illness, bullying, relationship problems, substance abuse, and previous suicide attempts.
- Anecdotal evidence has shown us that grief and loss associated with suicide is wide spread across families and that these families are often made up of a presenting adult with one or more child or adolescent.

Source: CYPRESS

Reaching out: Kelly Riley will lead Australia's first long-term service for children bereaved by suicide.
Picture: Steve Ferrier





Alison Xamon today and left, with her dad Alan Miller.
Picture: Nic Ellis

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specific support to these high-risk children and young people.

Ms Xamon said she was offered no support after her father died and was told, "don't cry, it'll be OK".

"I literally thought it meant I wasn't allowed to cry," she said. "What it meant was that there were adults who couldn't cope with my trauma. I stopped crying and I didn't cry for a couple of years after that. I'm sure that might have been perceived by some people as me being OK but I can tell you, I was not OK."

Ms Xamon said children sometimes internalised the blame for parent's suicide, were outwardly blamed for the tragedy — as she was — and saw a parent's suicide as the "ultimate rejection".

"I have had to live with the knowledge that my dad thought death was a preferable option to being my dad," she said. "That is a terrible burden for any child to have to bear. What I do know is that my dad had convinced himself that we were all going to be better off without him."

Ms Xamon, who has three children, urged suicidal parents not to believe their children would be better off without them.

"It's not a burden to your children to be alive, no matter how unwell you are. It's a burden to your children to take your life," she said. "All you do is shift the pain from yourself to your children."

Chris Gostelow, manager of school psychology services at the WA Education Department, said the death of a parent by any means affected children significantly but a suicide worsened the impact.

"Parents will do a really good job of supporting children in the event of the other parent dying but in the event of a suicide, it's often the case, in my experience, that the parents are not necessarily clear about how best to provide the support for that child," he said.

Mr Gostelow said death by suicide was extremely confronting for everyone.

"It can actually immobilise some of the support arrangements that would otherwise be in place within a family," he said.

"It overwhelms the surviving parents and even siblings. It can overwhelm their capacity to reach out and support each other because people are often

caught up with and consumed by the dramatic and powerful impact it's having on them as an individual."

Mr Gostelow said children often felt guilt, shame, anger and abandonment, more than children who lose a parent to another cause.

"The children who are survivors would quite likely experience a whole load of guilt. 'Was it something I did that caused it? Maybe I should have been more concerned when I saw my parent doing this a few weeks ago. Maybe I should have told mum or dad that this was happening,'" he said.

And he said suicide was still not treated like other forms of death and was a taboo subject.

"Shame can reduce the likelihood of a child reaching out to other people because other people don't know how to deal with this whole thing and it's too difficult," he said.

Mr Gostelow said a suicide often generated anger among those left behind, which could take over adults' empathy and ability to relate quietly to a child.

But the feeling of abandonment, of being left behind, is one that a child feels more than anyone else.

"The primary bond with another human being is through the parent and if that bond is destroyed through a choice of the parent then that can be a profound thing," Mr Gostelow said.

"Children will often need to reprocess the death of a parent by suicide at various points of their life. It will resurface as they develop into a young person, an adult, an older adult and so on," he said.

Mr Gostelow is working with Ms Xamon on clear referral pathways between schools and the CYPRESS service so children in need can be easily identified and helped.

Without that, Mr Gostelow said, there was a strong chance these children could develop harmful behaviours.

"If they are strengthened in their capacity to cope going forward, that means when they do confront those awkward situations in their own lives, hopefully they will be a bit more strengthened and resilient."

For more information about the CYPRESS service, contact (08) 9263 2150 or info@anglicarewa.org.au. If you or someone you know is thinking of suicide, phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit lifelinewa.org.au

AGENDA

From road to rail to

Liberal plan aims to cope with a metropolitan population explosion to 3.5 million people by 2050

Kent Acott

The underlying premise of the Barnett Government's latest transport plan is undeniable.

Doing nothing is not an option. Doing what we have always done is also not an option.

Just like the Opposition's rival Metronet strategy, the plan advocates a dramatic — and necessarily expensive — response to a Perth population that is expected to almost double by 2050 to 3.5 million people.

It proposes more train tracks, more bus lanes and more roads. And tunnels. Several tunnels.

It is mostly unfunded and some of the key projects won't see the light of day for at least 40 years.

But its objectives are admirable — to increase public transport use from six to 11 per cent of all day trips (including 65 per cent of peak-period trips to the CBD); to increase cycling and walking from 14 to 18 per cent of all day trips; and to reduce the mode share of cars from 57 to 50 per cent of all day trips.

"Over the next 35-40 years, 800,000 new homes will be required to accommodate Perth's growing population," the plan says. "This will nearly double the number of trips made every day in and around Perth — leading to over 12 million trips per day."

"Freight and commercial traffic will also increase significantly, fuelled by industry, business and retail changes, including online shopping."

"Increasing the share of trips made by public transport, walking and cycling will be critical to managing the travel demands of Perth's growing population."

And providing choice, it says, is critical because it spreads the transport load across all modes.

"The network has to be designed to accommodate the heaviest load," it says.

"If we can't 'spread the peak' so fewer people are travelling in the same direction at the same time and increase the proportion of people travelling by public transport, car-pooling, walking and cycling, then we can optimise the performance of the network and get most value from our investments."

"Our city's future success will be based on how accessible, efficient and reliable the transport network is and how well we are able to manage congestion."

The plan involves three tranches of projects — those required before Perth's population hits 2.7 million people (about 2030), those needed before the population hits 3.5 million (about 2050) and those needed beyond that.

Within these time-frames, the projects have not been prioritised.

The plan is also not final. It is now open for public comment, with the final report expected by the end of the year.

RAIL

The plan proposes an expansion of the Perth rail network from 180km to nearly 300km, including two new lines — the East Wanneroo Rail Link and the Stirling-Murdoch Orbital line.

The East Wanneroo Rail Link will service Morley, East Wanneroo and the northern suburbs. A rail spur from Marshall Road to Ellenbrook is being considered in the longer term.

- Stage 1 (by 2.7 million people): City to Morley and Marshall Road. Via a tunnel from the CBD to Morley.
- Stage 2 (by 3.5m): Marshall Road to the Joondalup line.
- Stage 3 (beyond 3.5m): Ellenbrook spur.

The Stirling-Murdoch Orbital line will be mostly underground, linking the specialist hospital and university centres of UWA-QEII and Murdoch. Ultimately, it will continue on to the Armadale line via Thornlie and from Stirling to Morley. Extensive tunnelling will be required.

- Stage 1 (by 3.5m): Stirling to UWA-QEII.
- Stage 2 (by 3.5m): UWA-QEII to Murdoch.
- Stage 3 (beyond 3.5m): Murdoch to Thornlie line.
- Stage 4 (beyond 3.5m): Stirling to Morley.

Under the plan, existing rail lines will be extended, with the Joondalup line going to Yanchep (by 2.7m), the Armadale line to Byford (by 3.5m), Midland line to Bellevue (by 2.7m) and Thornlie line to Cockburn Central (2.7m). These will be the last extensions to the Joondalup and Midland lines.

In the very long term, an additional heavy rail line will be needed in the southern region to meet the growing population in the Ravenswood riverfront and the future Bunbury fast train.

LIGHT RAIL

While the MAX light rail project is dead in the water, the plan proposes an inner-orbital light rail route, providing high-frequency services between UWA-QEII and Canning Bridge, via the Perth CBD and Curtin University.

- Stage 1 (by 2.7m): UWA-QEII to Curtin-Bentley.
- Stage 2 (by 3.5m): Curtin-Bentley to Canning Bridge.

BUS

Buses will continue to play an important role, especially as a feeder service to Perth's trains and residential growth areas. Queue jumps, signal priority and bus-only lanes will be provided for more than 20 key corridors to cater for high volumes of passengers.

Bus rapid-transit corridors will be developed to:

- Connect Ellenbrook to Bassendean station, Midland and the new East Wanneroo Rail Link (by 2.7m).
- Connect Glendalough Station to Scarborough Beach (by 2.7m).
- Connect Canning Bridge to Booragoon (beyond 3.5m).
- Murdoch Station to the Cockburn coast, via Fremantle (beyond 3.5m).

The Maylands bus bridge will be built to connect the Maylands peninsula to Rivervale. It will save buses eight kilometres and bring cyclists at least five kilometres closer to destinations across the river. Upon completion, a new orbital bus route will connect the Glendalough, Maylands and Oats Street train stations, via Belmont Forum, and provide improved access to events at Perth Stadium (by 3.5m).

