

# Helping workmates

Suicide rates in New Zealand are not declining, and there are calls for innovative solutions. Some companies are leading the way with suicide prevention programmes as part of workplace health and safety.

**EVERY YEAR** in New Zealand, approximately 75% of all suicides occur in men. More than half of them are men of working age. Men in this 20-65 age group are 10 times more likely to die by suicide than in a workplace accident.

## **Construction workers in vulnerable group**

Those who work in trades, construction, fisheries, forestry and farming in New Zealand have higher rates of suicide than men working in other occupations.

Workplaces seem to be logical sites to deliver suicide prevention programmes and capture at-risk working-age men. However, to date, the New Zealand national suicide prevention strategy has not focused on suicide prevention in men or in workplaces nor on targeting suicide prevention to employee groups with high suicide risks.

## **Queensland-developed programme**

In some regions, this is changing with the introduction of a workplace suicide prevention programme modelled on the MATES in Construction (MIC) programme



developed to address high suicide rates in the Queensland building industry.

MIC started as a workplace-focused programme with components delivered at construction sites or company offices. Significant commitment from building site

management to the programme has been a key contributor to its success.

Management presence at training sessions signals top-down commitment to the issue of suicide prevention amongst employees, and the use of worksites and work time for training shows company willingness to invest in the programme.

## **Benefits being seen in Australia**

The Australian programme has a strong commitment to evaluation. Results show that, after the programme was implemented, the suicide rate in the Queensland construction industry declined. This was when there was no decline in suicide rates in males in other occupations in Queensland and when the overall suicide rate in Australia was increasing.

Economic analyses suggest that MATES is a feasible and affordable strategy to address suicide in the workplace with an estimated 4.6:1 cost benefit ratio. Benefits to employers also include improved workplace safety and productivity and fewer sick days.

On the basis of these and similarly encouraging results, the programme has expanded beyond Queensland to other Australian states and beyond construction to other industries, including mining. It now receives funding support from both state and federal governments.

#### **Programme introduced here**

Based on the Australian programme, MATES in New Zealand (MIC-NZ) has been established with the goal of reducing suicide and improving mental health and wellbeing within New Zealand communities and workplaces.

Workplaces are underutilised sites for suicide prevention. Many people spend more time at work than with their families, and work colleagues may be in a better position to notice someone who is distressed

or depressed and link them to appropriate help.

Suicide prevention skills learned in the workplace can transfer to home and to community organisations that employees belong to.

MATES has been introduced into a range of New Zealand workplaces over the last year including those in local government, roading and construction.

Participants in the programme, including union and employee health and safety committee representatives, health and safety managers, HR staff and managerial and executive staff, have been positive and enthusiastic about it.

#### **Won an award**

An early adopter, electricity provider Netcon in Timaru recently won a Safety

Leadership Award at the 2016 Site Safe Construction Health and Safety Awards in recognition of their implementation of the programme.

Consistent with best practice in suicide prevention, the MATES programme is not a 'tick and flick' programme. To be successful, it needs to be embedded into company health and safety culture as an ongoing investment.

The long-term goal is to change workplace culture around suicide prevention and to proactively link employees to help rather than react after a suicide occurs.

The programme teaches employees that suicide is preventable and provides them with the skills and confidence to recognise a workmate who may be depressed or distressed and link them to help. ◀

## **MATES in New Zealand**

MIC-NZ is an integrated programme, consisting of three levels of education and training:

- General awareness training (GAT) of 1 hour for all staff, including managerial and administration staff, that raises awareness of the problem.
- Connector training – a 4-hour training that means there is at least one Connector on site for every 20 staff. Connectors are people who can connect people to help.
- Advanced gatekeeper training, to equip interested staff to provide 'mental health first aid' in the workplace and refer people for appropriate help. These people are the mental health equivalent of on-site paramedics and first aid officers.

The support component of the programme is provided through:

- clear referral pathways to ensure workers in need of support are connected to appropriate help

- on-site visits by field officers to support the site and its workers
- access to a 24-hour telephone helpline and to critical incident debriefing
- site accreditation, signage, badges, newsletters, social activities and other updates to maintain awareness of suicide prevention as a workplace goal. The programme consists of several stepped components.

MIC-NZ is a not-for-profit, community development organisation that relies on donations. It is not a service provider – the philosophy is to encourage a sustained culture of safety and wellbeing and to effect industry change. By not charging for services, it can provide training to small companies that might not be able to afford training costs. In this way, no one who wants training is excluded. ◀

**For more** ▶ Further information is available from Dr Annette Beautrais at [louis.beautrais@gmail.com](mailto:louis.beautrais@gmail.com) or mobile 021 77 590.