

media monitoring

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Call to end silence on suicides

MEGAN McNAUGHT

A GAG on reporting suicide in the media should be lifted to raise awareness of a growing mental health issue, a specialist says.

The 2010 Australian of the Year, Professor Patrick McGorry, spoke in Hobart yesterday at the Richmond Fellowship Asia Pacific Regional Health Conference.

Prof McGorry said it was time for a new approach to the issue that claims about 75 Tasmanians and 2500 Australians every year.

Those figures are higher than the road toll, and another 500-700 Tasmanians attempt to take their own lives every year.

Lifeline Hobart chief executive Christopher John supported the call.

Prof McGorry said preventing the media from

reporting on suicides only made people with suicidal thoughts less likely to talk about their problems.

"The silence feeds the whole taboo. The fact that no one talks about it means no one feels comfortable sharing their suicidal thoughts," Prof McGorry said.

Reporting on suicide is discouraged because of fears that it could encourage others.

But Prof McGorry believes discussing the issue in the media would have an opposite effect, providing it was done in the right way.

"The people who are concerned about this risk of copycat in the media have missed the point.

"They don't realise that the media has got a role to play in destigmatising and also making people aware of what a massive

public health problem it is," Prof McGorry said.

He said while "a fortune" was spent reducing the road toll, comparatively little was spent on suicide prevention.

"There hasn't been any significant reduction in suicide. In recent years it appears to be going up again so we are clearly failing to tackle it."

Mr John said if the community was more open to talking about suicide, people who were experiencing problems might be more inclined to talk to someone.

"We didn't openly talk about depression for years but that doesn't mean it didn't exist," Mr John said.

"We want to be able to reach those 500-700 people who attempt suicide each year and feel they can not talk about their problems."



HEALING COMPANION: James Onions yesterday with his new canine friend Banjo, a partnership he says has changed his life forever as he no longer feels lonely. Picture: KIM EISZELE

A dog's love drowns voices

MEGAN McNAUGHT

FOR much of his life James Onions lived fearing the voices he heard in his head.

These days he has Banjo the pug-cross to talk to, and the voices have gone quiet.

Mr Onions, 22, was diagnosed with schizophrenia four years ago. Yesterday he spoke at the Richmond Fellowship

conference about his triumphs in moving into his own house, getting a dog and planning a career helping others with mental illness.

When he first started hearing the voices, Mr Onions did not know what was causing them, and cut himself off from the world.

"I remember going into my room and staying in there all night," he said.

"The voices would tell me other people hated me. Everything felt like it kept getting worse."

Two years ago he moved into Richmond Fellowship accommodation and began planning for the future, including his dream of owning a dog.

"I have always wanted a dog but it took me almost two years because I wanted to know that I

could look after him," Mr Onions said.

Six months ago he got Banjo from the RSPCA, and that changed his life.

"I am not lonely anymore. I used to feel so lonely," he said.

"Now I have moved out [of Richmond Fellowship House] but I have Banjo.

"He goes everywhere with me and I enjoy the responsibility. It is great to think he is happy."