September 9, 2015

NSW Ambulance chaplain’s R U OK? Day plea to address suicide rate

NSW Ambulance Senior Chaplain Reverend Paul McFarlane has made a plea on behalf of paramedics that people take more responsibility for checking on those around them to help reduce the nation’s suicide rate.

The 14-year NSW Ambulance veteran and R U OK? Day Ambassador said up to 200 Australians attempt self-harm each day and seven complete their suicide attempt, according to Lifeline – distressing figures, not only for the level of despair it reflects, but the flow-on effect for bystanders.

“Paramedics see and deal with this on a daily basis and the emotional carnage it leaves is just horrendous. It’s not right and it shouldn’t happen. We genuinely want it minimised,” he said.

“I’ve never met anyone yet who was saved by paramedics from suicide and didn’t thank us for it down the track. People are just at a really black point in their life and if they can be turned around at that point and saved, generally speaking they go on to some good things.”

Reverend McFarlane said suicide and the deaths of children were the two most frequent callouts attended by himself and his team of chaplains because of the extreme trauma involved and the number of people requiring support.

“Suicides are awful - for the people thinking this is the answer and for the impact it has on others; the bystanders who see it, the paramedics who have to deal with it, the police who have to investigate it and take it to the coroner and relive it again six to 12 months’ later when it goes to court, and the families who are left with questions as to why it happened and often the torment of wondering if they could have done something.

“Based on the Lifeline figures, our paramedics are attending people who are attempting self-harm at least once an hour. Thankfully not all of these will be life-threatening, but my key aim here is that we minimise these figures and limit the exposure and impact on our paramedics.”

Reverend McFarlane said extensive resources were available to paramedics to help them deal with the trauma of their role. This included 150 peer support officers located across NSW, 38 chaplains and an employee assistance program that provides counselling services.

Managers are also trained to identify welfare issues involving staff and to take action where required.

As part of 2015 R U OK? Day tomorrow, September 9, Reverend McFarlane is asking that people adopt a general attitude of observing their friends, family and colleagues and act if the indicators are that something is not right.

“We want to get people on board with this message, realising that a couple of questions can change a person’s life.”

“At NSW Ambulance we focus on keeping a look out for our workmates and it’s something we aim to do every day of the year, not just on R U OK? Day. We do it and we encourage you to do it also.”

Reverend McFarlane said the key is to develop a level of relationship with the people around them so they know what’s normal and what’s not.

“If a person is not themselves, if they’re not happy or not quite right and you know them well enough, say something like, ‘You’re not your normal self today, are you OK?’.

“By asking the question and listening to the answer, you’re providing them with an opportunity to share and get the support they need.”

Save Triple Zero (000) for saving lives
He said some people might be reluctant to engage, not because they don’t care but because they are uncertain how to respond.

“People worry that if they open up the conversation they won’t have the answers. But you don’t need to take people on yourself; you don’t need to know what to do, you just need to be a caring person.

“Say something like, ‘You know what, that’s a tough one. Have been to your GP? They may have some help for you.’ Sometimes you might even have to make the appointment for them or with them, just to help them get the next bit of help they need.

“Be sure to follow them up afterwards. Don’t just say ‘That’s great, I’ll leave you to it’, suggest you go for a coffee or meet up afterwards. Check on them.

“We’re simply encouraging people to be a friend and journey with people.

“If we can do anything as a society to save some of these lives … The less people who commit suicide, the better it’s going to be for everybody as a society and certainly for the individuals who are being saved.”

For 24/7 support, contact:

Lifeline on 13 11 14
Mental Health Line on 1800 011 511