



September 13, 2017



Paramedics join mental health workers and NSW Health Aboriginal Liaison workers during a visit by the national RU OK? Day Conversation Convoy at Bourke last week.

Paramedics urge - make sure our seniors 'R OK'

With figures showing men aged 85 and over are more likely to die by suicide than any other age group, NSW Ambulance paramedics are urging people to check on seniors as part of the national mental health initiative, 'R U OK?' Day (tomorrow, Thursday, September 14).

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show the suicide rate for men aged 85 and older was 37.6 per 100,000 in 2012, more than triple the national rate. In 2016, 62 Australian men took their own life.

NSW Ambulance Senior Chaplain Reverend Paul McFarlane said people should be particularly alert to the changing behaviour of their elderly relatives and neighbours.

"You get stories where someone has died in their home and hasn't been found for a week and people say, 'How can that happen?' But how many people take the time to talk to their elderly neighbours, to establish whether they are going OK?"

"Older blokes are particularly vulnerable. Factors include isolation, failing health and loss of a partner. Statistically if the wife dies first, there's a high chance the husband will follow within 12 months either from natural causes or self-harm."

Is your **URGENCY** an **EMERGENCY**?



Rev McFarlane said people with good social connections tend to have the best mental health and resilience. “As people get older, however, their social circle dwindles and they have less people to reach out to. We need to take a greater interest in our elderly and, health permitting, help them to find some sort of connectedness to people.”

A veteran of NSW Ambulance and an ‘R U OK?’ Day Ambassador, Rev McFarlane said the annual R U OK? Day reminds people to start a conversation about mental health as a means of support and de-stigmatising mental illness.

He said four communications steps are being promoted – 1. ask RU OK?, 2. listen without judgement, 3. encourage action, and 4. check in (follow up). He has also toured with a national RU OK? Day Conversation Convoy to discuss mental health issues.

“People’s willingness to talk about mental health is improving, but we have a long way to go to fully de-stigmatise mental health issues,” he said.

Rev McFarlane said the simple act of asking “are you ok?” could make a genuine difference in a person’s life. “Our paramedics and Triple Zero (000) call takers are called upon to deal with the distressing consequences of depression and other mental health issues on a daily basis, which is why we are so committed to seeing the incidence of suicide and self-harm 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. Suicide is a tragically permanent solution to a temporary problem.”

As one of NSW Ambulance’s dedicated mental health and wellbeing support team comprising 40 chaplains and 200 Peer Support Officers, Rev McFarlane said he also regularly deals with paramedics in need of support after dealing with the consequences of suicide.

“It’s one of the most confronting things our paramedics deal with. We know first-hand the importance of reaching out regularly to each other and having an honest conversation about how we’re doing, to ensure they know that support is there for them if ever they are doing it tough.”

For 24/7 support, contact:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Mental Health Line on 1800 011 511

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