

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH
STANDING COMMITTEE**

INQUIRY INTO ABORIGINAL YOUTH SUICIDES

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
MONDAY, 20 JUNE 2016**

SESSION TWO

Members

Dr G.G. Jacobs (Chair)
Ms R. Saffioti (Deputy Chair)
Mr R.F. Johnson
Ms J.M. Freeman
Mr M.J. Cowper
Ms J. Farrer (co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 11.18 am**Mr GERRY GEORGATOS****Independent researcher, examined:**

The ACTING CHAIR: On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your appearance today. The purpose for the hearing is for the inquiry into Aboriginal suicide. At this stage I would like to introduce myself and the other members of the committee. I am Janine Freeman and the rest are Rob Johnson and Murray Cowper. The Education and Health Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. It is a formal procedure of Parliament and therefore commands the respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing. Hansard will make a transcript of the proceedings for the public record, and if you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we commence there are a number of procedural questions I need to have you answer. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Georgatos: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

Mr Georgatos: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: Did you receive and read the information for witness sheet provided with the “Details of Witness” form today?

Mr Georgatos: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today’s hearing?

Mr Georgatos: No.

The ACTING CHAIR: Would you please state your full name and capacity in which you appear before the committee today?

Mr Georgatos: Gerry Georgatos. I am a member of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project and a critical responder, in terms of the critical response project component of that, but I am appearing independent now of my ATISISPEP roles and in terms more of an independent researcher and visitor to communities.

The ACTING CHAIR: Do you have any questions relating to your appearance before the committee today?

Mr Georgatos: No.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming. You have given us an extensive contribution in terms of a submission of which I am about halfway through, to tell you the honest truth. I can assure you that I will get fully through it by the time we report, and that the staff will have looked at it extensively. The big question that you point out and the big issue that I suppose we would like you to discuss is why you have called for a royal commission. In the first instance do you just want to talk about that?

Mr Georgatos: Okay. I understand apprehension sometimes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, of first nations people, of royal commissions. The people I am working with—colleagues—and also at the federal level are supportive of a royal commission; others are not supportive of a royal commission because of the presumption that royal commissions do not deliver. They go to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and presume that the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has not galvanised the ways forward. It has not certainly implemented what should have been done and what was recommended; 338 of the 339 recommendations were endorsed by the Senate in 1992. But the reality is that without that Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, we would not have on the table what we have today to draw from, and the validation of all that is wrong and the ills and the ways forward. In effect, it has actually galvanised ways forward in the eastern seaboard more so than here; the more west we go across the country, the less the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody is galvanised and implemented and put into place. But the *Indigenous Law Bulletin* has confirmed that 40 per cent of the recommendations from that royal commission have been implemented on the eastern seaboard—one of them the custody notification service; it is appalling that it has not been implemented here in Western Australia, and it is problematic. But I will not go into that one in total. Royal commissions do have weight and do galvanise ways forward, and, as Professor Pat Dudgeon actually said, they can deliver the reporting mechanisms, can deliver the recommendations as entrenched. But no-one can tell me the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the one into the military and the 100-year ritualistic abuses has not led to the impermissibility of those practices, and also to the validation of people's stories, and also to accountability practices and various propriety commonwealth accountability practices now entrenched, with those royal commissions, effectively, not yet finished.

What we have in this country and in Western Australia, with one in four of all Aboriginal–Torres Strait Islander suicides in Western Australia, is a humanitarian crisis. It is official, according to not just us but to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, that one in 19 of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders will die by suicide. That is 5.2 per cent of population dies by suicide. That is problematic; that is a humanitarian crisis; that is catastrophic. There are multifactorial issues that have led to this. The only way we can examine the ways forward is to understand these multifactorial issues. These issues are all intertwined. It is not just understanding disadvantage; it is also understanding the traumas that have been generated from this disadvantage—the constancy of traumas—the situational trauma that has become multiple, composite, and that constancy has, for many, degenerated into aggressive complex trauma. We have to act and we have to actually respond to these with tailor-made solutions to the trauma, not just the disadvantage. We have prison rates at horrific rates; we have racialised imprisonment. One in 10 of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are estimated to have been to jail. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory it is thereabouts one in six. If we look at Aboriginal adult males here in Western Australia, one in 13 or thereabouts is in prison today. The psychosocial and psychological impacts on families—the dysfunction—is actually huge, and there are elevated-risk groups I will talk about who are former inmates, who are children who have been removed from their families and who are adults who as children were removed from their families that we need to disaggregate. The only way we can actually go forward to getting an understanding of the tailor-made solutions or identifying the issues to respond to with tailor-made solutions is with a deep examination—a multifaceted examination. It cannot be delivered by any one report. I note that Terry Redman said in that *Hansard* speech that we have done 40 or 50 reports in the last 15 years.

In the previous session I referred to reports and why we have actually gone for a tool to be endorsed by government—to be endorsed by the Prime Minister and Cabinet—who are the policymakers who do advise the ministry of health and ministry of Indigenous affairs and so forth on what should be supported and what should be funded. These reports are commissioned to universities, to

departments and to consultancies, so they have not necessarily picked up the kudos of what this tool that we are putting forward may actually pick up or whatever of it is endorsed by government. Then if it is endorsed by government, it is bona fide. But these reports are also a certain pitch. Some look at culture, some look at identity, some look at resilience, some look at remote communities and some look at the justice system. But we have not actually intertwined, in a multifactorial discussion, all the issues we need to actually examine deeply. I am for a royal commission because I see no other way forward. I see no other way forward in actually shifting the nation's consciousness; I see no other way forward in terms of the national consciousness in demystifying a lot of the issues, in breaking down stigma and prejudices and biases that are a blockade. I have actually found many parliamentarians that I have engaged with at the federal level, too, are problematised by a lot of the stigma that they have washed up, in terms of their origins and premises. I think it will benefit all of us, but it will also be a validation of the first nations peoples of this nation that we have actually finally taken them seriously in terms of this humanitarian crisis, but are going to work towards the tailor-made solutions we need to respond to in terms of various trauma, in terms of the fact that I have just related to the justice system with the higher risk rates, jail rates and juvenile—all that. We need to start discussing what is actually happening in the prisons, and are we going to transform prisons in terms of prison to training to work and education.

The ACTING CHAIR: So, Gerry, you are a consultant on ATISISPEP.

Mr Georgatos: Yes.

The ACTING CHAIR: And ATISISPEP is looking at these issues and they are multifaceted. We have just had evidence that when it is looking at suicide prevention and it is looking in the area of suicide, it is taking a broad definition of that in terms of community and all those multifactorial issues. What does that say about your confidence that ATISISPEP, given that you are a consultant, cannot deliver what you are talking about? We have not even seen the report, and you are working with them on the report —

Mr Georgatos: I have seen the report —

The ACTING CHAIR: — and you are already calling for a royal commission. What does that say about your confidence in ATISISPEP?

Mr Georgatos: ATISISPEP called for a royal commission; we put out a media release, which we will provide to you. We put out a media release on World Suicide Prevention Day—10 September—last year, calling for a royal commission or a national inquiry. You have just heard the project lead, Mental Health Commissioner Professor Pat Dudgeon, actually support a royal commission or a national inquiry. What it says, for me to answer your question specifically, is that I am absolutely supportive of ATISISPEP. I am predominantly the person who actually got it off the ground in terms of campaigning and lobbying with government to get that. Then we got Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander executive management and leaders to take it forward.

[11.30 am]

ATISISPEP is doing incredible work in what it is doing, and it will probably be more than what has ever been before, but it has to be understood and qualified by the resources that are available to it. All up, including the conference ATISISPEP 1, 2 and 3, it is a \$2.5 million project. So we are limited by the human resource capability within it, by the research and capability in terms of the extensiveness, by how much we can disaggregate to, and how much we can qualify. It will be a step in the right direction. It is not the be all and end all, and it is not the deep examination that I am actually talking about. The Indigenous Mental Health Commissioner, Professor Pat Dudgeon, just said that she supports a royal commission. She knows that it is multifactorial. She knows from her experience as a psychologist in the field and as a researcher in the field that we have multifactorial intertwined issues. We heard discussion in the earlier session of the social determinants. We have

heard of disadvantage. We have not even begun to touch on the trauma. We have heard of the response systems, prevention and post-prevention, and the political type of reform that we may actually need. We have got racialised economic inequalities that are not touching the light of day. So a royal commission will actually sponsor many more investigators, researchers and the resources required to get to the depth of all the issues.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Are you calling for a state or federal jurisdiction?

Mr Georgatos: I am calling for both. If Western Australia wants to sponsor its own, it should be doing that. Western Australia is actually one in four of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicides. Suicide is the tip of the iceberg. Let us not forget all the issues that drive towards it—the attempted suicide, the suicide ideation and the high-end depression that is a constant in a lot of the remote communities, which is your remit here today. But I will be talking about statewide, and the sense of hopelessness. We discussed a little bit before about purposeful activity and that it does not exist in some communities.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Sorry; I did not want to interrupt you. It is hard to interrupt you—you seem to be flowing on so well! I want to ask a quick question or suggest something. Would it in your opinion be more beneficial if there was a federal royal commission, because it would cover every state rather than just Western Australia? This problem is nationwide; it is not confined to just WA. Although we are looking at WA, I think what you are looking for is a nationwide solution. If you want some suggestions, help is more than anything.

Mr Georgatos: In terms of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, there was a report commissioned out of Western Australia in terms of our final report, so there was that demarcation to Western Australia. I will answer that two-fold really quickly. Western Australia is my home now. I have been here for 20 years. It is where my bones will be buried and where I will finish up. I love Western Australia. Yes, I would prefer a royal commission that is national, that is federal. But in terms of your remit, we could benefit strongly by a royal commission, and it would also send a pretty powerful message to the federal government. A royal commission is actually necessary here. If you do sponsor a royal commission here or recommended to government for a royal commission here, I would be absolutely supportive and thrilled at the potentialities. There is a grim reality here. You have read some of the stuff that I put out. It was because of Alison, who encouraged me to send things in or whatever, so I put together things at the last minute just as food for thought to mull over. The more west we journey across this continent, the worse it gets for first nations people, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The third worst is South Australia; the second worst is the Northern Territory. The worst is actually Western Australia. You are the mother of all jailers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in arrest rates, suicide rates and homelessness rates. As I said, 638 per 10 000 population in the Kimberley are actually homeless. That is an abominable rate, matched only by the Northern Territory, which is 731 per 10 000. Those two homelessness rates—some form of homelessness or other—outside of civil strife or natural disaster, are amongst the highest in the world. When we demarcate that to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it translates to about 12 per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Kimberly living in some form of homelessness. There are all sorts of issues to do with housing, social infrastructure and a sense of hopelessness—the jails, the psychosocial damage and the psychological issues—that we need to respond to. We should also be doing much more restoratively in our prisons. We have a huge missed opportunity in helping people when one in six of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population living in Western Australia have been to prison. The impacts are not rocket science. I cannot see what committee, what inquiry, what commission report, what university or what project, whether it is national or statewide, will deliver the extensiveness of what needs to be done other than a royal commission.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gerry, one of the reasons we are discussing this in this committee is because I, having lived in another life —

Mr Georgatos: As a police officer?

Mr M.J. COWPER: As a police officer in remote areas. It has troubled me right through to now, the things that have been going on, most of which the vast majority of Australians are oblivious to. I hold the view that it is arguably the biggest shame that we have. The problem I have is the notion, Gerry, of a royal commission. I have been through a royal commission and I see what they involve and I must say I am not overly confident that that is going to be the panacea that you are seeking. The problem is that if we have a royal commission and it does not deliver what we all would hope it would, then what?

Mr Georgatos: We cannot say that about the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody either. It has delivered something more than what would have been delivered otherwise, which would have been zero, unless we had some other mechanism.

Mr M.J. COWPER: So you are saying get what we can.

Mr Georgatos: We must get what we can. We have to extract every dividend of social change as we absolutely can. I am not arguing that it is a panacea. I am arguing that it is a way forward to more radically reduce some of the negative issues and negative risk factors than otherwise we can. It is an opportunity to galvanise. There is no greater mechanism in the state or the nation than a royal commission to do that. It is also putting on the table what we need to be able to draw on. Also, the political climate is changing. We are not in the 1970s, 80s or 90s; we are where we are now. We are going forward, and we have to work with that positivity that we are going forward and we have more chance to extract something from a royal commission now as opposed to 10 years ago or 15 years ago.

The ACTING CHAIR: But Gerry, you have said yourself, we have had the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and now we are incarcerating more Aboriginal people —

Mr Georgatos: Multifactorial issues

The ACTING CHAIR: — in our prisons than when we looked at that factor. How has that royal commission ensured that you do not repeat —we are still having deaths in custody?

Mr Georgatos: I agree with you, Janine.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Albeit not as much.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes, albeit not as much. I am similar to Murray. I put to you that in terms of a royal commission, is not saying to people that this is going to deliver something, giving people false hope?

Mr Georgatos: We have to give some hope—authentic hope—rather than no hope at all.

The ACTING CHAIR: I am not suggesting we do not give authentic hope; I am asking you to think about some other way of giving it.

Mr Georgatos: I accept what you are saying, Janine, and I am with you. I would have liked to see Western Australian governments past and present take on more and absorb more and soak up more from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, but they did not. They did actually take up some of the protocols. It has been argued that it is about 10 per cent, so it is not zero, but it is 40 per cent in Victoria and 40 per cent in New South Wales. The custody notification service was a huge opportunity for the committee —

Mr M.J. COWPER: I am going to go out on a limb here and say that my biggest fear, my biggest issue, is that we can actually say that we are not living in the '70s, '80s or '90s. Do you know what I saw last week—worse than what I have experienced previously?

Mr Georgatos: Where, last week?

Mr M.J. COWPER: In the Kimberley. That is having lived there for 12 years. I am saying that my biggest fear is dealing with the process of government. That washes across not just the Indigenous community; it cuts across all aspects of Australian life. We now have a process-driven bureaucracy that is slowly spiralling into small circles, and they are going to choke themselves to death. There, in essence, is the problem, I believe.

Mr Georgatos: Murray, that is why we need the royal commission. You said that things have not changed since the '70s. When I came to Western Australia from the eastern seaboard 20 years ago in 1994, I felt like I was in a time warp. I thought I was in Sydney in the '70s and had gone back in time, with the way first nations people were treated and the multicultural and all that sort of stuff due to the conservatives of this state. As I say, I love this state, and this is where by bones will be laid to rest.

Mr M.J. COWPER: It is also still in a time capsule here, because we have retained some —

Mr Georgatos: Yes, but the reality is we cannot be so defeatist or whatever. Someone like me—I paint the grim reality all the time. I am not one to put out all the positive news stories because they are piecemeal, they are ad hoc and they are not the context. I paint the grim reality all the time in order to galvanise change.

[11.40 am]

As I was able to push and get ministers to understand that we have a crisis in this country and it should translate from a pressing issue to a priority, we have got something like the ATSISEEP underway. The ATSISEEP is a positive and powerful and profound step in the right direction. It is not the be-all-end-all that can change multifactorially all the issues we now need to inculcate into the political climate. Janine in Alice Springs said to me that she is a believer that the world becomes a better place and we are in more positive times. I do believe that despite everything that you saw in the Kimberley last week and that I have seen over 20 years in remote communities and also the further west we go, despite what I have seen on Groote Eylandt and what I have seen in Leonora, which actually broke my heart—to see we are still fighting battles that should have been resolved years ago and in some of it we have actually gone backwards and pulled away mechanisms that were putting us in the right direction. How are we going to do it without a royal commission? The question is back to yourselves. If we do not have a royal commission, do we expect to actually change our process-driven government or process-driven jurisdictions to understand what is actually going on? I wanted to give some examples of ways forward here today and some of the things we should be looking at.

The ACTING CHAIR: How do they do it in other nations?

Mr M.J. COWPER: They have a war!

The ACTING CHAIR: No, how do they do it in —

Mr Georgatos: They do it badly. The reality is that to say that indigenous peoples in other nations—Canada, the United States or New Zealand—are faring well is not true. New Zealand is a different story in itself because of the high cultural content of those communities, the language itself and people being able to pull together—it is a different demography. But they still have horrific levels of racialised imprisonment. Greenland has with the Inuit the highest suicide rate in the world, then followed by the Kimberley. Regionally, Greenland is a jurisdiction of Denmark. Canada has its issues and problems. We portray pictures of all this stuff being well elsewhere, when in fact they are trying to do some of the same things that we are actually arguing here today.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Gerry, forgive me for a moment, can I help you here, perhaps? I have been in this place for 24 years now and I have served on many committees. I accept your call for a royal commission to make a difference. With most committee reports, and this one will be no different,

we will be delivering it in Parliament and then eventually it will go on a shelf and gather dust. It will be referred to from time to time, but I do not think it will have the significant impact that a royal commission would on the first people of this land. I have seen a difference and I have read a difference. I was police minister for four years and I visited many Aboriginal places throughout the whole of WA, and I could see firsthand some of the problems that they were suffering. I think with the Aboriginal deaths in custody there have been some positives from there. I think the police service have taken far more notice of how they have to deal with Aboriginal people. They have a different culture. Murray would know this better than I would, because he was a serving officer for many, many years. But in the short time that I have been here, and I came here in 1988, I have seen a difference, but not a big enough difference, I do not think at all. I think maybe your call for a royal commission is not unwarranted. I think it may be well warranted, because I think it will make a difference far more than our committee. I hate to say that, guys, but I really do. We will make a difference, but it will be short lived. It will grab the news for a week or two and people will refer to our committee report and will pull things out of it and will remind people in WA in particular, and other parts of Australia and the world, where there are differences between the different cultures living together side by side. I think a royal commission probably, I personally think, may well be the answer; not the whole panacea, but it will help.

Mr Georgatos: It is not a panacea; nothing is a panacea.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: No, what I am saying is —

The ACTING CHAIR: Can we have a question?

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Yes, hang on. I have not said much in this, Janine. Forgive me, but I want to have a few words and I have virtually finished. I just wanted Gerry to explain a little bit more or just give us some confirmation of what I believe personally, as one committee member, whether that to you has validity and whether my support for a royal commission would in any way assist the people that you are here to help. That is my question.

Mr Georgatos: You are the parliamentarians; you are the ones who can generate the royal commission. You represent every political party. Anyway, you are inquiring and you are a committee. I came here to argue because I know you are the people who can lobby for that change or make that recommendation as a committee. I respect what you said, Rob, and I agree with you, it can make a difference. All I am looking for is the optimum difference we can galvanise. I am not looking for a reduction of the parity between the suicide rates, the arrest rates and the jail rates. Obviously, that is what I want as an ideal and that is what should be, and maybe in time we will get to that, but we will get to it faster by a royal commission.

The ACTING CHAIR: But, Gerry, given that a royal commission would cost a substantial amount of money, would that money not be better using what comes out of ATSIPEP report and funding communities to deliver on the ground those things around prevention, around housing, around justice programs, around postvention and those sorts of things? Would that money not be better spent for the communities that you want to deliver to, the communities you have seen, if it was actually put onto the ground instead of into a royal commission?

Mr Georgatos: The amount of money that would be spent on a royal commission is not the spend we are looking for. We are looking for a much more significant spend. When we talked a little while ago, I was upset thinking about \$17.8 million—the raindrop funding of \$4.4 million over four years that has been quarantined and we have been waiting three years for that for specific committee programs to use. That will help some providers and some communities and help some people, but in terms of the context of the spend on a royal commission, we must extrapolate that and look at the potentialities. With the spend on that we will be able to galvanise and then get the spending that we require and get governments to do the spending in the jurisdictions that they require. What a royal commission will say will be a greater spend than we can generate from what ATSIPEP can spend and from what we can save on having a royal commission in the first place.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gerry, I can totally see where you are coming from and I know what you are thinking and I commend you for your good heart, but I am going to something that is probably a little bit controversial. The problem we have in Australia is that I do not believe that the vast majority of non-Indigenous Australians are ready to tackle this issue head on, because they have not been educated. What I am worried about is that if you do have a royal commission, Gerry, it is going to cause a bigger gulf between the two. What we need to do is try to bring them together. Most non-Indigenous people in this country think that Aboriginal people are drunks because that is all they see, but if they have ever took the time to go and have a look at the wonderful culture and the wonderful people that there are out there and what can be garnished and learnt from them is something that time is going to have to be the carrier of. By setting up this perceived wall, I think there is an issue with that, Gerry. I am not discounting a royal commission; what I am saying is that I am worried that it is not going to deliver what we were hoping it would.

Mr Georgatos: I have absorbed what you said and I understand. Look, time is a factor. The Australia that I live in now is not the Australia that I was born into. I was called everything under the sun because my skin is dark. My introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia is that before I was called a wog and everything else, I was called a boong and a black bastard because of the colour of my skin. The racism that I endured when I was young is not the racism that I endure today, although the racism is still there in its veils and layers and we are still hostage to it. I think we will get faster to where we need to get in terms of what you are saying through the lens of a royal commission, because we do need to soak up these conversations. We are hostage to —

Mr M.J. COWPER: I hope you are right, because I am not confident.

Mr Georgatos: Whether we are confident or not, we have got no choice and I will say why we have got no choice. It is because 5.2 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population are registered suicides, are killing themselves, taking their lives—five per cent. It is the highest that there is. Because of underreporting issues we know that it is one in 10 and we published that on the front page of *The Australian* instead of peer reviewing it and it going in journals and that sort of stuff because it needs to be soaked up by the nation. We have 10 per cent of people killing themselves. When we couple that with unnatural deaths, we have a humanitarian crisis. Let me give you one other statistic. That Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are living 10.6 years less and that we have improved the life expectancy is a myth. It is an estimation that has been calculated by the Australian Bureau of Statistics of people born today—the last estimation between 2010 to 2012. That is an estimation.

[11.50 am]

It is no different to targets that we do not reach or whatever age. The reality is that in Western Australia in 2014, if we go off the facts in terms of this present generation of people living today, in 2014 the median age at death for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander male was 49.9 and 56 for a female. They are living 25 and 30 years less.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gerry, I do not want to split hairs here. The reason we are having this whole thing is because I am really genuinely concerned about what is happening there, but in my own electorate I have had nine suicides since Christmas, including a 17-year-old girl.

The ACTING CHAIR: Non-Aboriginal.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Non-Aboriginal. If we were to take out the leafy suburbs of certain parts of the country and we went back to a microcosm and had a look at a certain community like the ones in my electorate, mine are through the roof as well, which is sad as well.

Mr Georgatos: What is your electorate again?

Mr M.J. COWPER: Down south.

Mr Georgatos: That is why I talked about the south west has the highest trending suicide rate, black and white, in the nation.

The ACTING CHAIR: Just on that, if a Royal Commission was established to look at suicide as an issue in our community, and as part of that there was a section on Aboriginal suicide, because suicide is a concern for all of the community, would you welcome that?

Mr Georgatos: I would absolutely welcome that. If we could get a federal or state—and I will tell you why. Suicide has touched my family. Suicide touches just about every family by some degree. For Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people, just about every family. Federally, nationally, one in three suicides are actually people born overseas, migrants; 5.3 million Australians are migrants with a median span here of 20 years. Newly arrived are an elevated risk group; those from Central Asia, elevated risk group; Eastern European females, elevated risk group; and other potential elevated risk groups. I would welcome that. When you have one in three of all migrants comprising the suicides, that is a huge problem. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at the worst levels of that and I would actually have it all and I would disaggregate it. What has actually happened is that we have not disaggregated to the high levels to those at most risk, to the elevated risk groups, some of whom I have identified here today. Rob.

Mr R.F. JOHNSON: Just one last question, if I may: Gerry, you have done a lot of research into this. Can you tell us the percentage of suicides in the Aboriginal community in relation to the proportion of the population overall and the same thing for non-Indigenous people? How many people are committing suicide in the non-Indigenous community and the proportion of their population? You see what I am trying to get at.

Mr Georgatos: That is a difficult question. I do understand what you are saying. The key to that question is this in response. I mentioned it already. In terms of population proportion how many people actually suiciding were Aboriginal is 5.2 per cent. That is official. That is registered—5.2 per cent. One in 19 of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths are actually a suicide. That is not including other unnatural deaths and indeterminate deaths.

Mr M.J. COWPER: Suicides in Australia are greater than the road toll.

Mr Georgatos: That is correct. In terms of the others, I think it is 1.7 or 1.6 per cent in terms of non-Indigenous suicides. It is a leading cause of death. Also you have got to remember that whatever you have got as a suicide, the general trend in terms of registered suicides is that it is more than likely double because of the under-reporting issues. We have got 1 200 road fatalities nationally. We have got nearly 3 000 suicides nationally. The road fatalities we know for a fact are 1 200. The suicides are between 3 000 and 5 000 or 6 000, in effect, but we have registered 3 000.

The ACTING CHAIR: You have a list of preliminary recommendations, and they are extremely varied and include things like a Christmas bonus payment for disadvantaged and investment into language reclamation programs, which I think is a great recommendation given what we witnessed at the conferences. Do you envisage that there would be somebody or some organisation to coordinate those reforms across government, given what Murray said in the past, which is everyone is acting in silos?

Mr Georgatos: That would be a good thing. One of the one of my criticisms which I did not really get to expand out about what I have seen out on the ground or whatever is that everyone does work in silos, which everybody has known for a long while, or engages with a very limited remit in terms of their engagement with each other. What we need is a 24/7 approach.

Mr M.J. COWPER: They are process-driven not outcomes-based.

Mr Georgatos: Yes, they are process-driven and they are not outcomes-based. Both those, Janine, if there is a commissioning body, that can be empowerment to actually galvanise the work with the various jurisdictions—in the end, we are working with different departments, jurisdictions, cross-

sectorially, various stakeholders. They need to be soaked up and some entity needs to try and encourage —

The ACTING CHAIR: Do you envisage that that could be the state Department of Aboriginal Affairs?

Mr M.J. COWPER: Gerry, you know what it is called; it is called leadership.

Mr Georgatos: It could be anything, but leadership is the imperative. I cannot begin to cover everything that I have seen and everything that I know here in the time remaining and I cannot even begin to cover a lot of the issues that burn the heart that I see on the ground and I cannot even begin to respond. It would take days and weeks and months just to unveil, unfold the whole lot, and how the responders could work better, how we could work better in prevention —

The ACTING CHAIR: I am assuming you have been able to put that into the ATSIPEP before, because you have had a lot longer time with them —

Mr Georgatos: I have put in as much as I can. It was mentioned today that TKI and the Mental Health Commission are working on various disaggregation and real-time data. That actually came from us because of our campaign in the last several years. For us the project has been two years but for us it has been five years. We have been calling for disaggregation and real-time data, and real-time data is important so we have notification protocols, not just limited to critical incidences and suicides, but also hospital admission for attempted suicides and other means that we need to factor in. We need those types of alerts to be able to work with people, but we had to try and galvanise someone else to do that because we did not have the resources or the capacity or even the money to work with the NCIS, the coronial database, to extract that information that we needed to get from them. What we have done has been limited by the resources we have got and \$2.5 million, it could have been said we could have given that to community too, to some communities to sponsor programs that have been either cut or need more funding or need to be rolled out, but in the end we have gone for a bigger picture scenario and here I am now post ATSIPEP arguing for the bigger picture scenario of a Royal Commission.

The ACTING CHAIR: I notice that Mervyn Eades is in the gallery and one of the big inputs from the conferences and our research is focusing on the positives and that people are taking and empowering things, and so I thought you might want to make some comment about the work that his community is doing.

Mr Georgatos: Mervyn came to the conference. I have known Mervyn for quite a long time. I turn to a lot of people, whether I am working with elevated risk groups in different types of scenarios, when it is trying to house people, black and white, it does not matter who we are or what we are; it is about humanity. Our previous interfaces with Rob have been through homelessness, but I have done a lot with working with people post and pre-release, trying to give them the positive of empowering them but through wellbeing and healing into education, training and work. Ngalla Maya—Mervyn's history you will know because you will probably have read some of what I put out there, and some of what he scored as national coverage after heading to Alice Springs. The gentleman had done 18 years in and out of prison and juvenile prison from 13 to 31 years of age, when he turned his life around, knows what all the issues actually are for his people in prison and put together the Ngalla Maya Aboriginal Corporation. They have been going for, let us say, nearly two years.

The people who he has got working with him, the partnerships are extensive and strong. He has got 170, 180 people in. The gender balance is split; it is even and he has got people from 15 years of age. He goes into the prisons and juvenile detention from three months prior to work with them, prior to parole, to see if he can commit them to education and training. A lot of them do not have literacy and numeracy. He provides that. He provides literacy and numeracy through the partners

and mentors he has got to get them to a level to be able to undertake—because it goes to the heart of retention in terms of training and various education. So he has got any number of programs and other benefits. The other bit that he has got is he has got the linkage to employers and he does not just set up people for a piece of paper at the end of it. He is actually scoring them the jobs. So 170, 180, he has already got about 80 or 90 into jobs now with an even split in the gender balance. That is powerful stuff. I have been to his office in Belmont where people are just walking in. Every single time I have gone in there, they are walking in for assistance and help. The word of mouth is actually huge because there is huge unmet need.

[12 noon]

They are now spreading this out to Katanning, Albany, Collie and, I think Narrogin. They are going to work with communities outside that radius. They already have people—24 in one community, 12 in another, 12 in another—signed up to do the courses and to commit to the program. This is about changing people's lives and improving their lives. I ran something similar at Murdoch University and brought in a lot of people—they had the highest retention rate, but you must support these people from the point of entry to the point of exit, psychosocially, psychologically and also, in the case of my mob that I was bringing through educational institutions to alternative pathway programs, through tuition. He is also mentoring these people; he does not actually strand them at all. If they have workplace issues—if they are not getting on with their employers or there are some issues they do not understand—he goes into the workplace and mediates. He does mentoring from a cradle-to-the-grave sort of approach; he does not give up on them and he works with them, so this has quite a high success rate. This is the sort of stuff we need to roll out and it will also go a long way, if we can commit people to this sort of stuff, to scoring an earlier parole. My experience of the prisons that I visited—Murray, all of you will agree—is that in general, people come out worse than what they went in. There is a situational trauma that finishes them up in prison, and a lot of them come in from low-level offending. By the time they have come out, they have compounded that trauma with other composite trauma, multiple trauma, aggressive complex trauma, and then they are a harder gig to actually work with. We strand people post-release. The huge statistic that should stay in your head is what we talk about with deaths in custody; any death in custody, any unnatural death is problematic. It is a huge issue that burns to the heart. But for all the deaths in custody we have, you are 10 times more likely to suicide or die an unnatural death in the first year post-release than at any time while in prison. The research that is out there is gospel on that without it needing to be revisited. Dr Stuart Kinner through the Burnet Institute actually also did a lot of research on that and he came up with the up-to-10-times rate, so we have to remember that 86 per cent of the prison population—it is worse in Western Australia, but I do not have the Western Australian statistics—has not scored a year 12 qualification. More than 30 per cent have not clicked over year 9. In the end, we have to do much more in the prisons than what we are doing. We have to have more restorative programs, transformative education, we have to have healing and wellbeing. We have to be pummelling these prisoners with all that sort of stuff. We have to give people an opportunity of redemption and forgiveness, because psychosocially, that is very important. Instead, we just continue to hammer them punitively, and they come out worse and reoffend and the dysfunction is displaced onto their families, and all of that. This is why I am arguing that it is all intertwined. I would love to see Ngalla Maya become a model for others; I would love to see it funded. We are arguing their case and they have some support from Prime Minister and cabinet; hopefully it gets across the line, but I would like to see it fully funded. It is Aboriginal-led and owned and it has partnerships with skilled individuals and people who know how to project manage and how to build this up. It has partnerships in all the various jurisdictions and departments, but unfortunately it is running on the smell of an oily rag.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. I do not think we have any further questions. Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within

10 working days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you again.

Hearing concluded at 12.03 pm
