

This is a submission of the Victorian Secular Lobby, a non-profit incorporated association, to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. We address the six questions of the Brief Comments submission process.

1. How can the Victorian community reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness?

Corrigan and Bink (2016), and Rössler (2016) provide the most well-known summary studies on this matter, in both cases noting that stigma and discrimination, apart from the direct negative effects themselves, also result to lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy, which in turn contributes to avoidance of treatment. However, evidence does exist that targeted approaches to stigma and discrimination which incorporate direct contact with those with mental illnesses can help resolve these problems. Public discussion without direct contact will be ineffective, and potentially harmful

2. What is already working well and what ideas do you have to better prevent mental illness and to support people to get earlier treatment and support?

Known strategies involve public education and discussion in a manner that is compassionate and orientated towards understanding the causes and treatments, i.e., increasing public mental health literacy. Encouraging an equality between mental and physical illness both as a cultural perspective and in law is necessary. Empowerment, through peer services and advocacy groups help long-term self-esteem issues for those with mental illnesses and alter the general cultural climate respectively.

3. What ideas do you have to prevent suicide?

Two of the most effective preventative measures is secure employment and income (Dow et al, 2019) Economic isolation and insecurity especially effects men, people in regional communities, indigenous Australians, and especially LGBTI Australians (National Mental Health Commission, 2013). The Victorian Secular Lobby draws particular attention to the fact that providers of the National School Chaplaincy programme have *repeatedly* displayed harmful and homophobic attitudes with increases the risk of suicidal tendencies (Shine, 2014., Needham, 2015).

It is on the basis of harm that the Victorian Secular Lobby has argued for the abolition of the National School Chaplaincy program should be abolished with funds redirected to professional psychological services. Where that is not possible, the State government should ensure that "Chaplaincy" should be available to all groups with at least a modicum of education in youth work and youth psychology.

Likewise the Victorian Secular Lobby has argued that religion in schools should be taught as part of history, literature, art etc when appropriate, and that it should part of the general curriculum and taught by qualified teachers. Ministerial Direction 145 is a partial contribution that reduces the ill-effects of the previous implementation of Special Religious Instruction.

4. What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

The differentiation and linkages between the social, environmental, and physical causes of mental illness is highlighted here, and likewise the differentiation between preventative and reactive action in mental health. Whilst the question example implies an emphasis on reactive and individual feedback matters, the Victorian Secular Lobby would like to emphasize preventative action and

social causes as having a priority reason that makes it hard for people to experience good mental health.

In particular, we would draw attention to issues like social discrimination, both of those with existing mental illness and of other groups (especially by religious organisations and individuals), which reduces the prospect of good mental health. We draw attention to an atomisation of society and failure in social integration (such as security and employment), which has profound effects on suicide. We draw attention to environmental pollution, where studies show that children raised in areas with high pollutants (e.g., lead) are much more likely to commit violent crimes as adults with loss of impulse control (Taylor, 2016).

5. *What areas and ideas for change would you like the Royal Commission to prioritise?*

Rather than provide a prescriptive solution, the Victorian Secular Lobby would recommend that the Royal Commission gives priority based on an empirical metric that combines the factors of the degree of harm caused or prevented, and the quantity of people effected.

6. *Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?*

The Victorian Secular Lobby would like to highlight the damaging effects of religious education being placed on the same level of authority when taught as secular studies; "exposure to religious ideas has a powerful impact on children's differentiation between reality and fiction, not just for religious stories but also for fantastical stories." (Corriveau, et al, 2014). A confusion between reality and fantasy that causes distress and dysfunctional behaviour is classic symptom of schizophrenia and there has been long recognition of the association between religion and schizophrenia (Siddle et al, 2002), both as correlation and as trigger (Mohr et al, 2009).

In this regard, noting to the differentiation and linkage between sociopathology and psychopathology, the Victorian Secular Lobby notes that the confusion of religious myths as facts effects not only children, but also adults. This must be recognised as a reality from several well-known tragedies in Victoria (e.g., the Melbourne stabbing attack of November 9, 2018, the January 20 2017 Melbourne car attack). This in no way places blame on any religion for being responsible for these tragic events carried. However, one means to remove the prospect of religion being a cause of future acts of public and private violence must be to ensure that the educational system enforces the distinction between secular reality and religious belief, in all schools.

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