



Secretary

Department of Health

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Coroner Jacqui Hawkins
Deputy State Coroner
Coroners Court of Victoria
Email: cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au

Dear Coroner Hawkins

Re: COR 2019 002530 - Coronial investigation into the death of Boe Memery

Thank you for your correspondence of 31 August 2022 providing me with the finding without inquest into the death of Boe Memery. I convey my sincere condolences to Boe's family for their loss.

The two recommendations directed to my department have been carefully considered. Please find my response below to each recommendation.

Recommendation One:

With the aim of promoting public health and safety and preventing like deaths, I recommend that the Secretary of the Department of Health consider the feasibility of establishing drug and alcohol rehabilitation and detoxification facilities in the Mildura local government area that are appropriately resourced and meet demand for such services in the Mildura community.

The coroner's recommendation will be implemented.

My department will deliver a specialist drug and alcohol residential withdrawal and rehabilitation facility in Mildura.

The 2022-23 Victorian State Budget allocated \$36 million over three years to construct the new state-of-the-art facility for residents across the Mallee and the north-west. Designed to create a welcoming and healing space for individuals and their loved ones, the new 30-bed adult residential withdrawal and rehabilitation facility will provide a therapeutic and home-like environment where people experiencing addiction can get the help they need to overcome alcohol and other drug use.

The facility will support members of the community going through withdrawal or detox and provide 24-hour care and support for people who have been through withdrawal or stabilisation and need to continue their treatment. This means people seeking help for alcohol and drug dependencies in Mildura and the Mallee can get the right treatment without needing to travel long distances or leave the local support networks they rely on. Once established, it will support around 300 people every year.

There is an expectation that the new facility will be culturally safe and designed to meet the needs of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Recommendation Two:

To ensure continuous, quality, and culturally safe mental health care is available to the Aboriginal community in Mildura, I recommend the Department of Health work with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation and Mallee District Aboriginal Services in Mildura to identify mechanisms to:

- a) Attract and retain qualified clinicians;*
- b) Upskill current staff to become qualified clinicians through scholarships; and*
- c) Provide access to a psychiatrist at MDAS wellness centre.*

The coroner's recommendation has been implemented in part and will continue to be implemented as the department delivers on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, as described below.

The Royal Commission identified an urgent need to address mental health in Aboriginal communities. The Royal Commission emphasised the central role of self-determined Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing services.

Scholarships

The Royal Commission's interim report, delivered in November 2019, included three specific recommendations for Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB). One of which is to implement scholarships that enable Aboriginal people working in SEWB teams to obtain recognised clinical mental health qualifications from approved public tertiary providers. A minimum of 30 flexible scholarships are to be awarded over five years.

The scholarship program, established by my department in early 2022, is upskilling current and future Aboriginal SEWB workers to become qualified mental health clinicians, as well as helping to attract and retain Aboriginal people in the mental health workforce.

The scholarship program is designed to:

- support students who intend to gain employment in an Aboriginal SEWB team or mental health role.
- provide opportunities for existing Aboriginal SEWB staff to upskill through their organisations.
- remain flexible to participants with the option of studying full time or part time, providing on-campus and online study, while working full time or part time in an Aboriginal SEWB team.
- create opportunities for professional development, retention, and growth within the Aboriginal SEWB workforce and Aboriginal mental health sector.

As of October 2022, 16 scholarships have been awarded to students studying mental health-related disciplines at RMIT University and Deakin University. My department is expanding the number of partnering universities to ensure greater access to the scholarship program in rural and regional Victoria and is currently working to onboard LaTrobe University as a third tertiary scholarship provider for Semester One 2023.

Aboriginal Mental Health Traineeship Program

The Aboriginal Mental Health Traineeship program, established by my department in 2017, is a flagship workforce initiative within the Victorian Government's ten-year *Balit Murrup: social and emotional wellbeing framework (2017-2027)*. The three-year traineeship program aims to increase the number of Aboriginal people qualified as mental health professionals and improve cultural safety within mainstream mental health services.

Under the program, trainees are employed in area mental health services and provided with supervised workplace training and clinical placements over three years, while concurrently completing a Bachelor of Science (Mental Health) degree through Charles Sturt University in New South Wales (via distance study mode).

In 2021-22, five trainees graduated from the program. On successful completion of the program, trainees are offered full-time employment with their employer.

In 2022-23, there are currently eight trainees in the program, all at various stages of completion. These trainees are employed across Eastern Health, Bendigo Health, Alfred Health, Latrobe Health, Mildura Base Hospital, Monash Health and Forensicare.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing teams

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) and the department are working in partnership to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria can access safe, inclusive and respectful social and emotional wellbeing care and mental health services for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Since the release of the Royal Commission's final report in March 2021, VACCHO and my department have:

- commenced building and expanding Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing teams in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across the state, so they can deliver multidisciplinary, community-based support
- supported ACCHOs to commission external health specialists to provide additional social and emotional wellbeing support that responds to the needs and strengths of local Aboriginal communities
- begun working with Infant, Child and Youth Area Mental Health and Wellbeing Services to recruit Koori Mental Health Liaison Officers in selected services, to

ensure that Aboriginal children and young people and their families can access culturally appropriate care within the mainstream mental health and wellbeing system.

Mallee District Aboriginal Service

In 2017-18, Mallee District Aboriginal Service (MDAS) in Mildura was funded by my department to develop a new social and emotional wellbeing service model to deliver integrated, culturally safe mental health services designed to meet the mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing needs of their local Aboriginal community

The MDAS SEWB service model is called the POD system (like the containers of life which hold seeds) and brings together transdisciplinary teams to support clients on their healing and recovery journey. The POD system provides a holistic wrap-around service that matches people with services to meet their specific needs, at time of referral. Services include social and emotional wellbeing supports, mental health, alcohol and other drugs support, housing, diversion from criminal patterns and assistance in responding to and reducing family violence.

The MDAS SEWB team are providing intake, assessment, and triage to connect the client with the right services at the right time. The POD system helps simplify access to social and emotional wellbeing services for people who may otherwise have difficulties accessing mental health services.

Mental health and social and emotional wellbeing support workers at MDAS are available to work with clients, families and community with a case management focus. Workers assist clients to maintain family links and connections as well as supporting clients through their emotional needs.

A team of specialists provide additional support including psychology, specialist counselling, dual diagnosis interventions, youth specific counselling and specific nursing care provided by mental health clinicians.

Currently the team at MDAS consists of a provisional psychologist, social worker and mental health nurse. Consultant psychiatrist and psychiatry registrar clinics, provided in partnership Mildura Base Hospital, are also held three days a week.

Aboriginal self-determined suicide prevention and response

In response to the tragic increase in Aboriginal passings by suicides in 2021, the 2022-23 *State Budget* included funding to support Aboriginal communities to codesign suicide prevention and response initiatives, in line with the principles of Aboriginal self-determination.

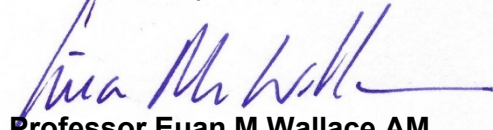
The department is working in partnership with the Balit Durn Durn Centre (Centre of Excellence in Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing) at VACCHO to deliver this work, including the establishment of an Aboriginal-led suicide and self-harm prevention advisory panel to advise on targeted efforts for Aboriginal clients and families, and areas of most need.

My department, in partnership with VACCHO, is committed to finding new and practical solutions to support the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people living in Victoria to ensure they can access the help they need, when they need it, in a culturally safe environment and close to home. Aboriginal knowledge and experience is also critical in the reform of the mainstream mental health system, so that services are better equipped to understand and meet the needs of Aboriginal people.

Should you wish to discuss these matters further, please contact Bailey Nation-Ingle, State Suicide Prevention and Response Adviser on 0408 931 918 or email bailey.nation-ingle@health.vic.gov.au.

Thank you once again for providing the finding. The Department of Health will continue to work with the Coroners Court of Victoria to reduce the incidence and impact of suicide in Victoria.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Euan M Wallace', is written over a light blue rectangular background.

Professor Euan M Wallace AM
Secretary

25/11/2022