

Social factors, not mental illness, to blame for high male suicide rate

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The popular assumption that most suicides are the result of depression or other mental illness has been challenged by a study of male suicide which will be launched later today by researchers at the University of Western Sydney.

Professor John Macdonald, Co director of the UWS Men's Health Information and Resource Centre (MHIRC) says there has been a tendency to relegate explanations of male suicide to mental illness, rather than looking at possible social causes.

Professor Macdonald and colleagues conducted a qualitative study of suicide in men aged 25-44 living on the NSW Central Coast.

The in-depth study with men who have attempted suicide and families of those who have taken their own lives, draws attention to factors in society which can be seen as pathways to suicide - the social determinants of male suicide.

"It's often a combination of social factors, not initially mental health problems, which cause five men a day in Australia to kill themselves," says Professor Macdonald.

"However, strangely, little research to date has been conducted on the role social factors, such as separation from children and partners and unemployment may have in determining suicide risk."

The Central Coast research showed the pathways towards suicide included: A mix of issues to do with employment - overwork or insecurity, adverse childhood experiences and consequent involvement with drugs and alcohol. Mental health problems are still sometimes directly involved and difficult events can lead to mental stress.

"Many men are overwhelmed by social problems like unemployment, family break-ups and not having access to their children. When a number of these social factors come together, they can be enough to send a man over the edge and contemplate self-harm," says Professor Macdonald.

He says the results of the study challenge the 'medicalisation' of suicide and obliges the community to work towards a more informed and compassionate society.

"The research clearly showed protective factors include social connections within families, and social support outside families," Professor Macdonald says.

"As a society we should now be looking beyond the detection of 'depression', and learning from those community-based programs of suicide prevention which build supportive structures in communities to help keep men alive."

"Hopefully, this will save more men and prevent the trauma felt by the families left behind," he says.

Professor Macdonald is the Foundation Professor of Primary Health Care in the UWS School of Biomedical and Health Sciences and is also a member of the UWS Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre.

The study was conducted in collaboration with North Sydney-Central

Coast Area Health Service (NSCCAHS) and the Central Coast Suicide Safety Network Inc.

Provided by University of Western Sydney

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