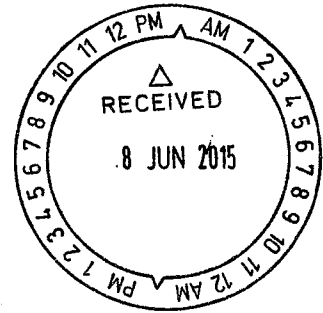




4 June 2015

The Hon. Simon O'Brien MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
GPO Box A11
Perth WA 6837



Dear Mr O'Brien,

Petition No 86 – St John Ambulance Employee Deaths by Suicide

Thank you for forwarding me a copy of the above petition and providing the opportunity to comment on behalf of St John Ambulance. St John Ambulance is an organisation committed to serving the community of Western Australia through its provision of First Aid and Ambulance services. Its commitment is to protecting and improving the health and wellbeing of Western Australian community members and that most definitely includes our own staff and volunteers.

St John Ambulance (SJA) has instigated a number of measures in relation to the points raised in the petition. I will reference these measures as I respond specifically to the four points and then draw those measures together to highlight their complementary nature. My response to the four specific points in the petition is as follows:-

1. The extent of the problem, including an investigation of the number of suicides of employees, contractors and members of St John Ambulance network.

Based on all of the information available to me the opinion that I formed is the five suicides that occurred and have been the subject of significant media coverage and speculation involve a multitude of factors that span the individual's personal and professional lives. My view is that there is no common thread across the individual cases.

It is important to me and our organisation, however, that this is independently tested. To this end, as a result of a request by St John Ambulance to the Health Minister, the Office of the Chief Psychiatrist will conduct a review of the five suicides to determine the degree to which the suicides might be linked to their employment as paramedics or activities as volunteer ambulance officers. The terms of reference for the Chief Psychiatrist's Review will include:-

- Examination of any available health records (consent will need to be obtained from the surviving next of kin both to participate in the review and to access health records of the deceased)
- Interviews with appropriate third parties, which may include surviving family members or work colleagues, among others
- Examination of information available to SJA relating to each case. This includes, although is not restricted to, the ambulance case history of each first responder

- Examination of SJA policies or programs, so far as their relevance to the comprehensive understanding of the individual or cohort of cases at the time of their deaths
- The Chief Psychiatrist may consider any relevant literature, reports, expert commentary or jurisdictional data relating to suicide and first-responders

2. The culture at St John Ambulance and the extent to which this culture has caused or contributed to mental health issues or suicides.

There is nothing to suggest that a unique culture exists within St John that may have contributed to the suicides. This is not to say that the challenges existing in the broader community in relation to mental health and suicide do not exist within St John. Our staff and volunteers come from a broad cross section of the community and it is only reasonable to assume they face all of the same challenges (relationships, financial pressures, recreational drug use, and work pressures just to name a few) as the broader community.

Nevertheless, the Chief Psychiatrist's Review is looking to establish if there is any common thread and if indeed there was a common thread related to the culture that exists within St John we would hope and expect this review would identify it.

3. Whether the fear of litigation of employees or others associated with St John Ambulance has resulted in practices by St John and those that insure it that cause or contribute to mental health or suicide rather than ameliorate them.

There is no general practice of St John taking or threatening litigation against its employees.

St John has a staff of over 1,400 people and normal employer-employee practices result in the organisation occasionally making the decision that a particular employee's employment with St John needs to come to an end. In instances where an employee believes this outcome to be unfair or inappropriate they have a number of options available to them including taking the matter to Fair Work Australia. This process will usually initially involve conciliation and then if necessary arbitration. It has happened that during the Fair Work Australia conciliation process the manner of departure and the amount of a final payment is agreed and a settlement reached. Parties to the agreement will usually be bound by a confidentiality clause.

St John acknowledges that the ending of an employee's employment for either health (mental or physical – work or non-work related) or performance reasons or as a result of a position becoming redundant, regardless of the terms and conditions under which that employment ends, can be very distressing for an individual. The very comprehensive wellbeing and support services in place at St John seek to provide our people with the best possible support through what can be a distressing exercise.

St John Ambulance has initiated a review of its wellbeing and support services to be conducted by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health based at the University of Melbourne. The work to be done by this group will involve the following nine steps:-

- (i) Review of St John Documentation
- (ii) Literature Review
- (iii) Face to face consultation with management and wellbeing and support staff
- (iv) Development of an online survey for all St John career paramedics and Volunteers
- (v) Post consultation teleconference with St John management and wellbeing and support staff
- (vi) Undertake the online survey with paramedics and volunteers

- (vii) Consultation with St John management and wellbeing and support staff on outcome of review
- (viii) Presentation of preliminary findings
- (ix) Final report

4. Whether improvements of oversight, transparency and accountability of the St John Ambulance service in Western Australia are required and specifically whether these improvements would be best implemented by centralised management by the Department of Health or an entirely or partially run state ambulance service in Western Australia.

The integrated nature of the St John Ambulance model in Western Australia delivers a high level of community resilience through first aid and volunteerism and a world-class ambulance service not matched by any other ambulance model in Australia. In the 2009 Ambulance Service Review undertaken at the request of the Minister for Health, the Independent Chairman of the Review, Mr Greg Joyce, in his covering letter presenting the review findings to the Minister, made the following comments:-

The national figures conclusively show that SJA has the most efficient ambulance service model in Australia and has saved this state substantial funds over the last century.

Much has been said about a "state run" service model but the evidence suggests other jurisdictions in Australia which have state run models are beset with similar problems to the SJA model and at twice the cost. Indeed all of the indicators show that Western Australia is performing very highly in the comparative analysis.

St John Ambulance has a very stable workforce with a low level of attrition. In the 2015 Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services (ROGS) St John in Western Australia reported an annual attrition rate among ambulance operational staff of 2.25% compared to the national average of 3.6%.

In summary, this petition seeks to link a number of issues to the fact that over a 15 month period there were five suicides involving three paramedics (two of whom had resigned from St John prior their deaths) and two volunteers, one of whom had only been with St John a short while and the other who had not done any ambulance duties for almost 12 months.

As a result of the public concern being raised, much of which was based on speculation in the absence of the specific facts relating to each case, I wrote to every staff member and volunteer within St John – over 6,500 people. In the letter, I asked people to respond directly to me with their views on the issue of wellbeing and support within St John. I then wrote again to all of them summarising the feedback I had received. As a result of sending out the 6,500+ letters on two occasions I received a total of 51 written responses – some supporting our approach to wellbeing and support and some critical of that approach. In addition, St John Ambulance has instigated a range of independent reviews. These reviews all have a different focus but are complementary in terms of providing an understanding of the suicides, an analysis and assessment of St John's wellbeing and support services and the opportunity to look more critically at broader employee relations and volunteer member services within St John. These reviews are:-

- Chief Psychiatrist Review to look specifically at the five suicides.
- Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health based at the University of Melbourne to review St John's approach to the provision of wellbeing and support services.
- The Independent Oversight Panel (Dr Neale Fong, Hon. Ian Taylor, Professor Sandy McFarlane) to provide independent oversight of the other two reviews and receive

submissions (written and verbal) on areas not covered by the other reviews, i.e. the broader issues associated with employee relations and support and volunteer membership services and support.

The Chief Psychiatrist will report directly to the Director General of Health with the report then being provided to St John Ambulance. The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health will report to St John Ambulance. Both reports will be provided to the Independent Oversight Panel and St John will give the Panel full and direct access to both Review teams with the expectation that the Panel will draw on the information from those Reviews as well as to identify any gaps in the entire review process.

These reviews are currently underway and are expected to be complete before the end of the year. They are addressing the points which parliament has been asked to examine and are doing so with a degree of independence that I believe will give both the public and our staff full confidence in the processes and full confidence in the sincerity of the St John organisation in seeking to provide the best possible environment for our staff and volunteers as well as the best possible wellbeing and support services.

St John shares the concerns about the issue of suicide in our community and seeks to be an active participant in the discussions and actions aimed at reducing the number of these tragic deaths in our society. We are investing heavily in building our wellbeing and support services for staff and volunteers. We are also closely examining further ways in which we can contribute to a reduction in these deaths through leveraging the footprint our organisation has in this state through its direct exposure to 20% of the WA population each year with our first aid training and ambulance activities.

I would be very happy to discuss these issues in person, if the committee felt that was desirable, and can be contacted on [redacted] to make arrangements.

Yours sincerely



TONY AHERN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER