

## In conversation with the New Zealand's Chief Coroner

Said Shahtahmasebi, PhD



Judge Neil MacLean, Chief Coroner of New Zealand (View the full interview at:

<https://vimeo.com/112207369>)

Keeping the conversation going about suicide is one of the initiatives organised by the grassroots suicide prevention group in Huntly, Waikato, New Zealand. As part of this initiative the Huntly group organised a Community Conversation with the Chief Coroner of New Zealand on July 7, 2014.

In this workshop Judge MacLean provided a personal and professional view of suicide and suicide prevention, its complexity, and the need for a collective effort to reduce the suicide rates.

After the workshop, Judge MacLean kindly agreed to talk to Dynamics of Human Health.

The full interview can be watched here <https://vimeo.com/112207369>.

Judge MacLean has been a coroner for over 30 years. He became the Chief Coroner in 2007.

“well I have been a coroner over 30 years,..., I took on the job of Chief Coroner in 2007... one day a reporter contacted me to comment on the statement made by the State Coroner in South Australia that it is time that South Australians took their heads out of the sand and acknowledge the fact that the road toll which is seriously dropping in South Australia as contrasted with suicide toll which is climbing... how could this be? What are we missing? And shouldn't we be speaking out about it? and the reporter asked me 'what do you think about that Judge?' – from that little acorn an oak is grown and I started to become interested and started to probe the figures... in our system we pick up all the data in real time as it is happening, will know about any presumed suicide within an hour of it happening, we track it, log it, and have all the information about it. So we started to look at our statistics ... then I was approached to talk about the phenomenon of suicide in New Zealand and the almost conspiracy of silence...”

He said “I don't know how many times I have spoken around the country, today in Huntly was another example, and it is ongoing...”

“I learn every time new stuff– it reinforces in my mind the ripple effect of suicide... 540 odd suicides a year, over 10 a week, no sign of it coming down, at least until very recently – yet the road tolls have come down from the 800s to 300s...”

Judge MacLean then raised the question so if we can reduce the road toll shouldn't we try to reduce the suicide toll? He went on to add: “Suicide is a very complicated subject but so was the road fatality situation.”

In 2011, Judge MacLean issued a press release stating that our current methods of preventing suicide are not working and called for a new approach to suicide prevention. He also suggested: “there may be room for a gentle opening up of the restrictions on media reporting of suicide, but we need to consider all viewpoints – especially those of families...”

<http://www.3news.co.nz/Chief-Coroner-releases-NZ-suicide-statistics/tabid/423/articleID/223638/Default.aspx#ixzz230JkrbCi>).

Judge MacLean was criticised by the medical modellers and proponents of suicide secrecy for his comments. When asked what was the thinking behind such a statement, Judge MacLean explained:

“... I became aware that there was a very entrenched feeling amongst some in what I might call the suicide industry or the suicidologists, and the health statisticians ... who had reached a conclusion that suicide was such a dangerous thing to talk about that it was best not to talk about it, to not allow publication in the media or anything about it, for people not to openly talk about it, that to say to someone to discuss the question of suicide with them was dangerous...I became aware of that attitude, I was very cautious at first ...”

He admitted that he was a little concerned that perhaps there is something in this and he was worried that if he starts talking about suicide it may open up the floodgates, the numbers of suicide would not drop, and instead they may increase and go through the roof. But, he need not worry: “... now time has told the story, 3 years on they are not increasing, they're staying more or less the same and perhaps starting to drop...”

“so an initial cautious concern which is why I used the expression ‘gentle opening up’ as contrasted; I went to a suicide prevention conference in Australia a year ago and there bereaved by suicide groups were talking about ‘kicking the door open’, ‘smashing the ceiling’ so compared with some overseas we are still relatively cautious about this...”

On causes of suicide Judge MacLean said “if I knew the answer to that I will be a Nobel Prize winner! 30 years in the job I am none the wiser now than I was... it is not mental illness, it is not about mental illness although it can be a component... I suppose ... you might summarise as it is people who have lost faith in themselves, feel unconnected, feel unsupported, feel they can't talk about it, which then feeds into this whole thing about being taboo and an overwhelming sense of loneliness and just disconnect: ‘I am not part of this world, I am different, and I can't cope, and I need help and I don't know where to go for it’”

On those who insist on attributing suicide to a cause such as depression, or, talking about suicide, Judge MacLean said “... you know it is not a science, there is no science, we are talking about human behaviour and human behaviour is not something that is guided by scientific principles ...”

“I was conscious of a very strong point of view which I think I can see the ground shifting there, I see a number of people who were of the school of thought that say to talk about suicide either in general or specifically is dangerous I think I can see an attitude shift...”

Click here to see the full interview and further comments on the New Zealand Government's suicide prevention action plan (2013-16), on cyclic suicide rates and funding of suicide prevention <https://vimeo.com/112207369>.