LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
CLUSTER OF YOUTH SUICIDE

DR STANGANELLI et al.
HOBART, RANZCP 2012
OBJECTIVE:

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO SHARE OUR COMMUNITARIAN EXPERIENCE FACING A CLUSTER OF SUICIDE AMONG ADOLESCENTS WITHIN A RURAL AREA IN QUEENSLAND (AUSTRALIA)
INTRODUCTION:

SUICIDES AMONG ADOLESCENTS ARE A PAINFUL EXPERIENCE FOR ANY POPULATION AND FOR ANY MENTAL HEALTH TEAM

AT THE SAME TIME, IT IS A GREAT COMMUNITARIAN RESPONSIBILITY FINDING HELP AND AN ADEQUATE APPROACH FOR THAT CRITICAL SITUATION
DEFINITION:

CLUSTER OF SUICIDES AMONG ADOLESCENTS ARE A GROUP OF SUICIDES OR SUICIDAL ATTEMPTS WHICH OCCUR TOGETHER IN TIME AND SPACE WITHIN AN SPECIFIC COMMUNITY

INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS ARE PRONE OF CONTAGION PHENOMENA AS WELL AS PEOPLE LIVING IN RURAL AREAS, ARMY AND PRISIONS

HIGHER INCIDENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

POPULATION OF MACKAY: 160,000 INHABITANTS

11% INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MACKAY: 34.7%

- 0-4 years
- 5-14 years
- 15-24 years

NATIONAL REGIONAL PROFILE (MACKAY) 2011 CLASSIFICATION CODE 340
Children aged 0 - 15 at risk of social exclusion
by SLA

Legend
Child Weighted Social Exclusion Deciles
1 = Most Social Exclusion
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10 = Least Social Exclusion
Unreliable data (pop < 30 or NS > 80%)

Note: Child weights are based on all children aged less than 16 years.
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MACKAY: 34.7%

HOW DOES THE CLUSTER START?

There is a general consensus that suicide is the product of complex set of individual, situational and socio cultural factors.
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

November 2007: First Indigenous adolescent “A” committed suicide by hanging

“A” was idealized among our adolescents and he was remembered as a role model in any conversation

Consultations for suicidal ideation and attempts dramatically increased in Community Mental Health, Schools, High Schools and NGOs
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

August 2008: “B” another Caucasian adolescent, friend of “A” committed suicide by hanging
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

September 2008: “C” an Indigenous adolescent committed suicide hit by a train
He had met “A” and “B” on the streets.
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

September 2008: “D” an adolescent relative of “C” committed suicide by hanging
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

September 2008: “E” a young adult relative of “A” and “B”; committed suicide by drowning in a mining town close to Mackay
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

September 2008

Two other adolescents family related hung themselves
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

September 2008

One girl and a young adult, both Indigenous, hung themselves in places where their friends did it before
Numerous suicidal attempts followed those suicides within their relatives, neighbours or friends. The adolescents were venerated and glorified by their community.

Parents, teachers, mental health professionals and NGOs met in order to develop a crisis intervention committee. Media was adequately informed to avoid more suicides.
The community lived a mixed of feelings including fears, confusion and grief. It was very difficult to process cumulative losses in a short period of time and at the same time to be resilient enough to continue working with suicidal adolescents.
Each anniversary of their death, all the youth walked on the streets with pictures of their dead friends, with songs and sorrow. We were concerned about new suicides. Indigenous adolescents continued seeing their friends in dreams who gave them advice, or support.
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MACKAY: 34.7%

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN DOING?
Crisis intervention committee

- Coordinates the prevention
- intervention
- and postvention activities at a local community level which incorporates
- Primary intervention
- Secondary intervention
- Tertiary intervention
Crisis intervention committee
PRIMARY INTERVENTIONS

- Involves people from the whole community, group or population who are given suicide awareness and bereavement support training and are willing to talk to a person at risk of suicide or support/listen to a person who has lost a loved one to suicide.

- School staff, night patrol, youth programmes, drug and alcohol rehabilitation staff, and police, general hospital staff, defence forces staff etc. Hanssens, 2008
SECONDARY INTERVENTIONS

- Involves suicide alertness of trained Aboriginal Mental Health Workers, nurses, teachers, doctors and Aboriginal Community Police Officers who have completed the Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) to assess initial risk and refer if necessary for further assessment. Hanssens, 2008
TERTIARY INTERVENTION

- Involves highly trained gatekeepers who are alert to and can properly assess and treat suicidal clients.
- Emergency staff, psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, police 24 hours service.
- In response to suicide bereavement, the facilitation of support groups is provided and with complicated grief, counselling. Hanssens, 2008
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

WE ASKED FOR ADVICE TO INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL AUTHORITIES INCLUDING:

- PROF DR GRAHAM MARTIN (BRISBANE - AUSTRALIA)
- PROF DR ERNEST HUNTER (CAIRNS - AUSTRALIA)
- PROF DR SALVADOR CELIA (BRAZIL - SOUTH AMERICA)
IN ADDITION TO THAT, WE PLANNED:

• BARBACUES WITH ADOLESCENTS

• CAMPINGS WITH OUR INDIGENOUS CASE WORKER

• SMOKING CEREMONY IN THEIR HOUSES AND COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH CENTRE

• NARRATIVE THERAPY WITH TREE OF LIFE MODEL (Dulwich Centre Foundation)

• MEETING WITH ELDERS TEACHING ABOUT THEIR CULTURE

• REVIEW OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE WITH YOUTH

LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...
POPULATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MACKAY: 34.7%

RESULTS...
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

RESULTS:

FINDINGS ARE CONSISTENT WITH STATISTICS IN QUEENLAND AND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

SUICIDE AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IS 70% HIGHER THAN RATES IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

INDIGENOUS SUICIDE IS AN UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

POORLY UNDERSTOOD

SUICIDE IN INDIGENOUS ADOLESCENTS IS 7 TIMES HIGHER

INDIGENOUS YOUTH HAD 3.6 TIMES HIGHER SUICIDE RATE THAN HIS PEERS 15 TO 24 YEARS OF AGE
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

RESULTS:

43 % OF YOUTH SUICIDE ARE IN CLUSTERS

CONTAGION PHENOMENA

COMPLICATED GRIEF

IDEALIZATION

SENSATIONALISM

INTENSE EMOTIONAL ATMOSPHERE
RESULTS:

- 90% WERE MALES
- INDIGENOUS BACKGROUND
- BETWEEN 12 - 17 YEARS OLD
- HISTORY OF STRONG SUBSTANCE ABUSE
- THEY HAD EXPRESSED THEIR SUICIDAL PLANS TO THEIR FAMILIES AND FRIENDS
- POOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS
- UNEMPLOYED
- HISTORY OF CONDUCT DISORDER
- REFUSAL TO TREATMENT
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

HANGING WAS USED IN 86.6 % OF ALL SUICIDES

IN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE COMPARED

WITH NON INDIGENOUS WERE HANGING IS 36.3 %

OUR CASES WERE 90 % BY HANGING

RE-ENACTING PREVIOUS HISTORY OF COLONISATION?

DISPOSSESSION?

RACISM OR SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION?
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE

ATTACHMENT DISORDERS - VIOLENCE DURING PREGNANCY

EXPOSURE TO SUBSTANCE ABUSE DURING PREGNANCY

HISTORY OF TRAUMA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

SECOND GENERATION TRAUMA AFFECTS PARENTING

DEVELOPMENTAL DELAYS

WITNESS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

70 % HAD ONLY A MATERNAL FIGURE

LIVING ON THE STREETS, UNEMPLOYMENT

FAMILY HISTORY OF ALCOHOLISM, SUBSTANCE ABUSE

DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, DISLIPIDEMIAS
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

• EXPOSURE TO SUICIDE OF FRIENDS, RELATIVES, NEIGHBOURS
• BEREAVEMENTS (FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY)
• FAMILY CONFLICTS IN THE IMMEDIATE GROUP
• PAST OR PENDING LEGAL ISSUES
• PREVIOUS HISTORY OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS
• HIGH VULNERABILITY TO PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ILLNESS
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

TREE OF LIFE:

THIS IS AN APPROACH FROM NARRATIVE THERAPY DEVELOPED IN SOUTHERN AFRICA TO WORK WITH CHILDREN AFFECTED BY HIV/AIDS (Ncube & Denborough)

ENABLES CHILDREN TO TALK ABOUT THEIR LIVES, STARTING FROM THEIR ROOTS, THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND DREAMS, AND THE SPECIAL PEOPLE IN THEIR LIVES
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

TREE OF LIFE:

IT HAS BEEN USED IN AUSTRALIA IN MANY DIFFERENT CONTEXTS:
TRAUMA, NATURAL DISASTERS, IMMIGRANTS
THERE IS A VERSION FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS

CHILDREN JOIN THEIR TREES INTO A “FOREST”, DISCUSSING IN GROUPS
HOW THE STORMS AFFECT THEIR LIVES AND HOW THEY RESPOND TO THEM AND TO PROTECT EACH OTHER
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

TREE OF LIFE:

OUR ADOLESCENTS DID NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THEIR ROOTS

THEIR BRANCHES WERE BROKEN AND LOST IN TWO DIFFERENT CULTURES

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR OWN CULTURE (TSI OR ABORIGINAL)

DISCONNECTION FROM LAND, CULTURE, RELIGION, TRADITION, KINSHIPS
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS CULTURES

RESPECT FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, THEIR CULTURE, SPIRITUALITY

THEIR SPIRIT OF HOPE AND HEALING THROUGH SHARING THEIR STORIES

UNDERSTANDING THEIR OWN GRIEF AT EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVEL

THEIR HAVE CULTURAL OBLIGATIONS AFTER THE DEATH

THEIR PRESENCE IS REQUIRED ACROSS FAMILY GROUPS WITHIN COMMUNITIES

THEIR LAND IS SACRED AND THEY HAVE A SORRY BUSINESS OR GRIEF

FAMILIES AND EXTENDED FAMILIES TRAVEL LONG DISTANCES FOR THE AGAPE

AGAPE: “A LOVE THAN CAN TRANSCEND SORROW AND BRING UNENDING JOY IN THE SPIRIT ” (Hanssens, 2007)
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

ELDERS AND FRIENDS CAME WITH THE ADOLESCENTS
TO OUR COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH ASKING FOR HELP
CUMULATIVE TRAUMAS REPLICATED
TRANSMITTED IN CONSECUTIVE GENERATIONS
TO BE EXPOSED TO A FRIEND OR RELATIVES’ SUICIDE INCREASES RISKS
SUBSTANCE ABUSE MASKING DEPRESSION AND COMPLICATED GRIEF
LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE...

CONCLUSIONS:

CLUSTER OF SUICIDES IN YOUTH ARE DIFFICULT TO HEAL

THEY ARE LIKE SPARKLE IN SUGAR CANE OR BUSHFIRES

COMPLICATED GRIEF PERPETUATE THE DISASTER

CUMULATIVE LOSSES IN SHORT PERIOD OF TIME

OVERCOMING YOUTH SUICIDE IS A SLOW PROCESS THAT

REQUIRES THE COMPROMISE OF AN ENTIRE SOCIAL GROUP

A LONG-LASTING AWARENESS


Krysinka K., Martin G. -The struggle to prevent and evaluate. Application of population attributable risk and preventive fraction to suicide prevention research. Suicide and Life-threatening behaviours, 39 5:548-557.


Youth at risk outreach Services (YAROS) Queensland Government. 