

The government's response to the royal commission into veteran suicide gets a lot right – but makes a couple of missteps

Published: December 2, 2024 9.38pm AEDT

Carolyn Heward

Lecturer, Clinical Psychology, James Cook University



Bianca De Marchi/AAP

An average of 78 serving or ex-serving members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) have died by suicide every year for the past decade.

In 2021, the government announced the formal establishment of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide to tackle this national tragedy.

Now, the Albanese government has released its response to the royal commission's final report.

The government has agreed or agreed in principle to 104 out of the 122 recommendations put forward in the commission's final report, released in September.

According to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, the response presents

an historic opportunity to deliver lasting reform and support our Defence personnel, veterans and their families.

But what does the response deliver on, and where does it fall short?

Mental health and the military

More than half a million Australians have served or are currently serving in the ADF.

Of serving members, 22% report mental health disorders. This risers to 46% among members who recently transitioned out of full-time service.

Ex-serving women are more than twice as likely to die by suicide compared with civilian women.

While suicide rates for ex-serving men who leave the ADF voluntarily are comparable to age-matched civilian men, the suicide rate for men who leave service for involuntary medical reasons is almost three times as high.

The number of deaths by suicide over recent decades far outweighs the number killed in active duty.



Military personnel who have recently left full-time service are at heightened risk of mental distress. SeventyFour/Shutterstock

The reasons for the disproportionately high rates of suicide among ADF personnel are complex.

While trauma experienced during deployment is likely to play a role, many current and ex-serving members who have died by suicide were never deployed overseas. The royal commission found systemic and cultural issues in the ADF have a crucial part to play.

As an example, there are often tensions between traditional military culture and mental health needs. The report identified excessive “self-reliance” as a barrier for help-seeking. On one hand, self-reliance is often viewed as a military virtue. But when taken to extremes, it can prevent people from seeking help.

How did the government respond?

It's very positive to see the government accept 104 of the commission's 122 recommendations.

Throughout, the commitment to co-design, where the government will work with ex-service organisations, members, veterans and their families in the design of support programs and guidelines, shows respect for military identity and lived experience.

Professional development is also a worthy priority, with enhanced military cultural competency training for health professionals and improved trauma-informed practice. Changes like these show an understanding of the unique challenges faced by service personnel and how military culture affects help-seeking.

The government's ongoing commitment to clear the Department of Veteran's Affairs' (DVA) claims backlog will remove a major source of stress for veterans seeking help.


Finally, the move to establish a new inquiry into military sexual violence represents action on a significant problem in the ADF.

What's been left out?

Only one recommendation – to compensate veterans permanently injured in training at the same level as those injured in active service – was not supported.

The government's decision to maintain the longstanding principle of higher compensation for active service touches on core questions about how we value different types of service.

Given many service members never deploy, it potentially devalues the service they do provide. My research has found not being deployed can have a negative effect on a defence member's sense of identity and their perception of being a "warrior". Rejecting this recommendation could contribute to identity disruption and poor mental health and wellbeing for those who don't deploy.

 Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, Minister for Veteran's Affairs Matt Keogh and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese addressing a press conference.

Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, Minister for Veterans' Affairs Matt Keogh and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at a press conference revealing the government's response to the royal commission. Mick Tsikas/AAP

People as the greatest asset?

In the government's full response, it notes the establishment of a taskforce within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to consider those recommendations that have been agreed in principle and noted for consideration.

The government has noted 17 of the commission's recommendations for further consideration.

One is a recommendation to increase the DVA's fee schedule so it's aligned with that of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. This essentially suggests paying more to health-care providers so they have greater incentive to provide care to military members.

The government's response suggests a need for "military-informed" care rather than just increased fees. While veteran health needs do differ from disability support, the government's failure to support this recommendation could be seen to send a message about the value society places on defence members.

In a press conference when the government released its response, Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles said "Defence's greatest asset is their people". Funding models need to align with this value.

Similarly, multiple recommendations about data and research were passed to the taskforce. The lack of immediate commitment to research funding demonstrates a gap between rhetoric about prioritising personnel and actual research investment. Without appropriate research funding, our ability to develop evidence-based solutions is impaired.

Finally, there are questions around the taskforce itself. For example, who will lead it? How will it involve people with lived experience? How will its success be measured? Being in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet suggests a high level of attention, but questions remain regarding time frames and accountability.

Where to from here?

The government's response to the royal commission shows that, for the most part, it recognises the systemic and cultural issues the commission highlighted in its final report. But cultural change will be an enormous challenge.

Looking ahead, implementing the royal commission's recommendations requires balancing urgent needs with implementing sustainable change, and maintaining momentum with ensuring meaningful consultation.

The success of these reforms will depend on maintaining focus and keeping defence and veteran wellbeing at the centre of all decisions.

Open Arms – 1800 011 046 – provides 24-hour free and confidential counselling and support for current and former ADF personnel and their families. The Defence all-hours Support Line – 1800 628 036 – is a confidential telephone and online service for ADF members and their families. Lifeline is available on 13 11 14.