

Media Release

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Bipolar disorder: Ripples set to become a tidal wave?

An alarming report released today reveals that people with bipolar disorder* are often misdiagnosed and left untreated, causing unnecessary suffering and costing the community millions of dollars.

"Bipolar disorder: Costs: An analysis of the burden of bipolar disorder and related suicide in Australia", commissioned by SANE Australia, has prompted calls for improved funding for basic services and for greater awareness and education for healthcare professionals and the community.

"Far too many Australians with bipolar disorder receive third rate treatment," said Barbara Hocking, Executive Director, SANE Australia, "Sixty-nine per cent of people with bipolar disorder are misdiagnosed, often confused with schizophrenia and depression, with 10.2 years the average time to an accurate diagnosis.ⁱ We really are selling them short.

"It is critical people receive early and appropriate treatment before the disorder causes untold and unnecessary pain, which then ripples through the community causing disruption to work, study, family and friendships.

"Up to 60 per cent of people with bipolar disorder have a substance abuse problemⁱⁱ, the divorce rate is doubleⁱⁱⁱ. Tragically one in six Australians with bipolar disorder suicide^{iv} – with 12 times higher suicide rates than the average population," Ms Hocking adds.

Lynne Pezzullo, author of the report says, "Our findings show that the direct and indirect costs of bipolar disorder and associated suicides are substantial. 12% of Australian suicides are people with bipolar disorder and that, for survivors, the indirect costs of lost productivity, carer burden and welfare payments outnumber health costs fourfold. Costly hospitalisations and significant disease burden can be avoided through simple interventions reducing suicidality.

Professor Phil Mitchell is Head of the School of Psychiatry, University of New South Wales, and the Black Dog Institute, Prince of Wales Hospital was involved as a consultant in the development of the report.

“The dramatic findings in the report show that bipolar disorder really is the forgotten psychiatric disorder. While awareness and understanding of disorders such as depression and schizophrenia have grown, bipolar disorder – which is as common as schizophrenia - is under recognised.

“The report identifies that one third of Australians with the disorder do not receive any treatment and the majority of the remainder receive inadequate treatment. There is clearly an urgent need for improved diagnosis and treatment of bipolar disorder to reduce the delays and improve the situation for those with the illness.

“Effective treatment for people with bipolar disorder and their carers should include safe and effective medication as well as psychological treatments, ongoing clinical support, education about the illness and how to deal with it, psychosocial rehabilitation and a range of other services to enable independent living”.

Carlos Suarez is 36 years old and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 10 years ago. His father suicided from the disorder when Carlos was 15.

"The last 10 years have been a tough journey for me. Before the illness, I was an over achiever at school, both academically and musically. I was accepted into the Conservatorium of Music and then became a lawyer. My world fell apart for me after I graduated when I ended up in a psychiatric hospital.

"When I was first hospitalised nobody was able to tell me what was wrong with me. I went to group therapy but it felt like the doctors were feeling around in the dark.

"The illness has impacted nearly every area of my life, disrupting my relationships, finances, putting my mum under incredible strain and limiting my career opportunities. Sadly I learned you don't just have to learn to live with a mental illness, but also to deal with the stigma and lack of understanding associated with it as well.

"I was one of the lucky few who then visited a GP who had an interest in mental illness. Since I was diagnosed with bipolar, I have received appropriate treatment. I am now working and would say I lead a relatively full and normal life.”

The report, examining the costs of bipolar disease, was prepared for SANE Australia by Access Economics, in consultation with leading mental health specialists. The report was funded by an unrestricted grant from GlaxoSmithKline.

* sometimes known as manic depression

ⁱ Depressive and Manic-depressive Association (DMDA) 2001 [Living with bipolar disorder: How far have we really come?](#) Constituency Survey, Chicago, USA

ⁱⁱ Brady and Goldberg, 1996 [Substance abuse and bipolar disorder](#) Paper delivered at the Ninth Annual US Psychiatry and Mental Health eJournal 2(3)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitchell et al 2003 [Summary of guideline for the treatment of bipolar disorder](#) RANZGP Clinical Practice Guidelines Australian Psychiatry Vol 11 No. 1 March

^{iv} Access Economics 2003 [Bipolar Disorder Costs: An analysis of schizophrenia and related suicide in Australia](#) Report for SANE Australia