

Productivity Commission

The following transcript excerpt is from a Productivity Commission public hearing into mental health which took place at Central Plaza Annex Building 345 Queen Street, Brisbane on Tuesday 3 December 2019, pp.84-90.

Commissioners in attendance: Professor Stephen King, Commissioner, Ms Julie Abramson, Commissioner and Professor Harvey Whiteford, Associate Commissioner.

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

PROF KING: Thank you so very much. Eric, is it?

MR PEREZ: Yes.

PROF KING: If you'd be able to state your name, the organisation you're representing, and any opening comments you'd like to make.

MR PEREZ: No worries. Eric Perez. I'm the Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland Seafood Industry Association. I do have something read in, if that's okay.

PROF KING: Please, yes.

MR PEREZ: Thank you. So, thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Commission. The Association is the state commercial fishing peak body, and I'm providing feedback to you in my capacity as the CEO of that association. So, to start with, as the Commission noted on page 2 of its overview and recommendations draft report that the cost to the Australia economy of mental ill health and suicide is estimated to be somewhere between \$43 and \$51 billion with any additional \$130 billion cost with diminished health and reduced life expectancy. This isn't a good context to be talking about mental health, particularly from an industry perspective, and that's the perspective I'm bringing here. I'm not trying to diminish the experience of others, I'm only an advocate for a group of commercial fishermen, and fisher people families that are impacted by poor mental ill health.

The statistics suggest that there's no argument that poor mental ill health has social and economic impacts across Australia. Our food producers, in particular, are typically families operating micro and small businesses in coastal, regional and remote Queensland, and across Australia for that matter, and continue to suffer for poor mental ill health. I thought I'd add 'coastal' to the regional and remote elements that are in the two draft reports that you have, because there are parts of the coast that are very much not accessible to everybody, and that's typically where we do our work.

In a recent report, and I've provided three reports to the Commission before coming here, around mental ill health led by Tania King and her colleagues. Particularly one piece of work done for the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation titled, 'Sustainable Fishing Families: Developing industry human capital through health, wellbeing, safety and resilience', provided a lot of data suggesting that there are some issues in this industry that haven't been captured before and need to be put into the public record. Now, I initially provided those three references, when I looked at the two reports I could only find fishing mentioned once in 1200 pages. But when I read the context of what was being done, I'd understood that it's not – wasn't

specifically one industry or set of industry thing looked at but that tweaked this particular submission.

PROF KING: Yes.

MR PEREZ: So the work done by Dr King and her colleagues found the following, by way of summary, 'Sixty per cent of the fishers who responded to the survey had moderate to very severe bodily pain which is higher than that reported by the ABS to the general population at 46.5 per cent. Over half the respondents said pain had interfered with their normal activities. The most common health symptoms experienced by fisher's surveyed included back pain, joint pain, fatigue, stress, trouble sleeping, sunburn infections, hearing problems, over 30 per cent of those surveyed experienced these health symptoms. Surveyed fishers reported being diagnosed with a number of conditions that are high rate in the general population, particularly high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, type 2 diabetes and cancer.'

And finally but not less importantly, commercial fishers who responded to the survey experienced significantly high levels of high and very high psychological distress than the Australian population as a whole. Very high levels of psychological distress were experienced at 16 per cent and 16.2 per cent of fishers responded respectively compared to eight per cent as noted as high, and 3.7 very highly strained, aged 18 years and over. There's something happening in my industry that's not being talked about and needs to get some (indistinct) so hopefully these statistics will help you to do what you're doing in your work.

The report presents views of fishers themselves who identify the perpetual uncertainty generated by current Fisheries management strategies as the key contributor to their stress. Described as modern uncertainties, these kinds of stressors include closures, restructures and reform as well as the perpetual threat of livelihood loss through such management changes which are happening in Queensland as well as around the country. I'll get to the context of that in just a second.

In this State we're going through a reform process that's lasted for a couple of years now and we've had families and individuals not knowing whether they're going to have a business from one day to the next for two years which – so just ongoing psychological distress of which they've received no assistance from government, again I'll get to why that's important in a second. So from a Queensland point of view there are multiple organisations that represent commercial fishers. There are about four that are active including the QSIA. I'm the only paid employee out of those four associations. Everyone else that does work in those bodies, including (indistinct) are all volunteers. So capacity to do anything to help is extremely limited because we are primarily volunteer organisations.

So this is what the association does at a State level, we disseminate information via social media and news posts to provide industry with information regarding mental health issues, in addition, we've recorded a podcast with various experts in the mental health area to try to get that information out. I did that off my own bat because I couldn't see that just reading an article was enough to try and get people discussing the issue of mental health, let alone dealing with it on an individual basis. Again, I claim no expertise in this area which is part of the capacity limiting parts of this industry.

From a national perspective we have an industry peak body known as Seafood Industry Australia. Its main focus has been to try to secure financial support for industry to be able to

access mental health support from the government. This has involved considerable (indistinct) effort over the past few years. Both the Coalition and Labor at the Federal level went to the election with a promise of 600,000 for mental health support. At this stage SIA, Seafood Industry Australia has secured that funding and is looking to implement that across the country, 600, 000 doesn't sound like a lot of money but with an industry that's very new to trying to deal with this, it is a good start.

MS ABRAMSON: Is that restructuring money or money directly for a mental health awareness program?

MR PEREZ: Money, direct money to do that. I think, SIA is going through a process with the relevant Federal Government agencies to see what qualifies as help under that funding.

MS ABRAMSON: Yes.

MR PEREZ: So one thing that I'd like noted here and one of the things when we talk about stress and mental ill health particularly in my industry is that, it's typically coming from without not coming from within. So, I'd like to read the following into the record, 'Considerably more work and resources need to form part of industry restructure to assist individuals and families to deal with the impact of legislative or regulatory change. The current government's so-called fisheries reform, provides the Commission with an exemplar of how mental ill health is a by-product of legislative change.'

So a couple of points to note, there was no regulatory impact assessment when the reform was put in, so mental health didn't even feature in what was going to happen once these changes took effect or about to take effect. No funding that industry is aware of to help deal with the stress generated from the process, other than there are networks out there that you can access, go and access them, that's about as much as we've been given.

Fisheries Queensland Department that looks after our fisheries has provided contact details of organisations out in the ether but that's about it. And the so-called reform fundamentally change the market in which we operate for at least 24 months industry have been waiting to see its final quota allocation or how it's going to be able to catch its seafood on a year to year basis and we still don't know what that looks like. And some draft allocations that came out, maybe six months ago, have cost some in the industry 50 per cent of their livelihood. So they're still working with an unknown as to whether or not that's the allocation they're going to get going forward. So that does nothing for better mental health.

So the question is, what is the level of responsibility that should be assigned to governments and the government agencies when changing fundamentals of how an industry operates? My industry didn't ask for this reform process. They were willing to have the conversation but now that it's in tow and things have been thrown at us as opposed to having discussions around what they mean, why should we bear the brunt of mental ill health and stress caused by that process when we didn't initiate it?

Industry did not see the government so-called reform process and again, there's a level of responsibility that Government and agencies owe industries when they do this and I just don't mean – sorry. I don't just mean this industry, I mean all food production industries, I think we're the same as the farming sector and I make note that in the first volume of the report there

are groups put together so LGBTI, and young people and other groups that vulnerable to poor mental ill health.

I think in one of the categories was remote and regional – living in remote and regional areas. I think you could lump in most food production into that category because the stress being experienced by those food producers is real and it's growing and it's not a baby. Whatever the systems are out there to help these people aren't getting the job done and I'm making that observation on someone who's had that lived experience.

Finally, some key questions that arise from your draft reports for me as an advocate is, what does a fit for future better mental health strategy look like for my industry? Who should fund that strategy to implement better mental health outcomes? And are existing strategy approaches too generic or would an industry specific approach lead to better mental health outcomes for industry? And the final point would be, who pays for that? So that's my submission, so I'm happy to take some questions.

PROF KING: Thank you for that. Because you've taken us down to an individual industry, I'm now going to start off by taken it again, broader. Is it reasonable for me to say that what you're seeing with the seafood industry and I'm aware of the reforms in there because they're also happening down in Victoria and various stages I happen to have heard about them and seen the consequences on the fishing industry down there. But to what degree is it reasonable to say, what you're doing is identifying a group that we really didn't identify in the draft report which is groups industries, those whose livelihoods are undergoing change.

So it's more than just food producers, I'd put to you. I'll give the example of another group that I've worked with which is taxis and of course taxi drivers faced uberfication and we won't go into the details of what actually happened there but we do know there was literally, taxi licence owners lost hundreds of thousands of dollars and some of them unfortunately took their own lives, they saw that as the only way out.

So my question to you, do we need to think about rather than say the seafood industry or areas of Australia where food producers are undergoing stress for say, drought? Should we thinking of how a mental health system deals with groups who are undergoing stress at a particular point of time due to changes relating to their industry and their livelihoods?

MR PEREZ: Yes, with a but.

PROF KING: Okay, yes.

MR PEREZ: Yes, I think in terms of trying to streamline services to lots of people across vast geographic area, I would agree with that. But in terms of individual level, I guess each of those individual groups have demographics that make them unique. So before you talked about its important to look at youth, mental health and suicide prevention which is a critical thing. But in my industry we have an aging fleet, so we're dealing with older, particularly older men who don't go to GP's at the best of times for their own regular health, let alone for mental health issues and not saying that GP's are the only place that they can stop there but when you don't have a culture of reaching out for mental health help, how do we bridge that gap to reach to what your – to answer your question. So I'm not anti the premise of the question, it's more, we still have to build an architecture from where we're at in our headspace to get to where the help is, and someone needs to build that bridge and (indistinct) reasons to help to do that.

PROF KING: Yes.

MR PEREZ: But if I was going to have influence on the system, is you need to reach out to groups like us and ask us what's the architecture to get from us to a system because it really just doesn't exist.

PROF KING: Yes.

MR PEREZ: Which is why people in my position and other jurisdictions in this country are hesitant to get more involved because we don't have the skills required to – we don't ever make claims that we can diagnose.

PROF KING: No - - -

MS ABRAMSON: Mr Perez, could I ask you something. Sorry, to interrupt, Stephen.

PROF KING: No, please.

MS ABRAMSON: But there have been initiatives in things like construction, you know, Mates in Construction and I'm just wondering with your industry association whether there would be learning from those types of organisations, which are grassroots organisations, so appreciate there's been a CFMEU involvement in that, whether you'd see a space to do something like that given what you've just talked about.

MR PEREZ: If it's not reinventing the wheel, they can help, yes. We'd be happy to look into that. So for us, we're an open book when it comes to what can we do to help because one thing that I've seen in the draft reports and in the topic more generally, and please correct me if I'm wrong, again I claim no expertise here is that research around why mental health is important, I think that needs to stop. We need to be worried about intervention, how do you help people getting over the humps in their life, whatever that might look and from an industry advocates perspective, I'm talking operators that are still capable of going to work and (indistinct) a living. I'm not talking about those that have profound mental ill health that need medical intervention. So that spectrum it's a massive - - -

MS ABRAMSON: Well I understand that. The reason I raised the Mates in Construction is because everyone working in the industry could see the very high suicide levels amongst a predominantly male workforce in construction, a tough environment, where talking about things was not the norm. But I think, and I could be corrected on this, the evidence is that they've really made quite a lot of inroads into the culture and people being able to talk about mental health issues. So I'm just putting that on the table.

The other thing too is, I am aware in a number of restructure – industry restructures which Commissioner King talked about, that I think, I could be wrong here, but I think with some of the farming support that actually put some mental health supports in as well. So we understand what you've said to us about an industry which is restructuring but I would ask you to have a look at the Mates in Construction, because I think you'll find that they would be very helpful and willing to talk to you.

MR PEREZ: Yes.

PROF KING: And Mates in Mining is another one, it's done the same sort of thing.

MS ABRAMSON: Yes.

PROF KING: Yes.

MR PEREZ: So that was Mates in Mining.

PROF KING: Mates in Mining, yes.

MS ABRAMSON: Mates in Mining and Mates in Construction. It doesn't take away from the evidence you presented to us but they are programs with very similar workforces.

MR PEREZ: Yes, yes.

MS ABRAMSON: Could I ask you one additional question. I've made an assumption about the workforce but are your members basically family run businesses?

MR PEREZ: Micro and small, yes.

MS ABRAMSON: Yes.

MR PEREZ: So multi-generational - - -

MS ABRAMSON: Yes.

MR PEREZ: - - - families and one thing I didn't put in the notes but for the record, a lot of the small scale fisheries, so your small crab fishing businesses and net fishing businesses which catch the majority of the fish that people consume are very much regionally based. So where they live is where they work and there's a difficulty when you have reform processes, again, not that we call for them but they get thrust upon you that because you've got flexibility in your licence to fish somewhere else, the assumption is from those that have never actually done the job that we just blank out this bit of coast line and you can just go somewhere else. Try doing that in your job, how about we stop you getting your pay for six months and you find somewhere else, to work somewhere else geographically which is never taken into consideration yet these are the people that set up the structures in which we work in. So, yes.

MS ABRAMSON: We were quite - - -

PROF KING: Sorry, just to follow up on that because I just want to make sure I'm not assuming stuff about the industry structure. So, it would be situation where the fishers would be licensed, their licence would usually be for a particular catch, as in the quantity, what they're allowed to catch and the geographic location, where they're allowed to do that catch?

MR PEREZ: Yes.

PROF KING: Yes. Okay, because that's the Victorian situation and I suddenly thought I better check and I'm not assuming stuff that's incorrect.

MR PEREZ: It's pretty similar around the country except with what we're going through now under the change process, there will be more what they call, 'Fishing zones', so you can only fish in a certain zone and not the whole coast which then limits your ability to move from one region to the next and that's what was built into the flexibility of these businesses before the change. So that's why there's people, you know, 24 months in they still don't know, well what is my business structure going to look like until they tell me what my allocation is - - -

PROF KING: I think in Victoria it's been zoned for quite a while.

MR PEREZ: Yes, slightly different. Yes.

PROF KING: Sorry, I just jumped in.

MS ABRAMSON: Sorry, I just wanted to ask one final question if I may and we would welcome a submission, it's about access to services because I'm also making an assumption that your members work very irregular hours. So the fact that they would be able to access what we might call mainstream services might be very difficult. You've talked about them being in coastal regions. So having something said to us directly about that would be quite useful. Thank you.