

President's Piece



Happy New Year to all of our members and supporters. I sincerely hope that everyone has had an enjoyable festive season. It is unfortunate that the season of celebration

and goodwill seems to come around very quickly every year and it as quickly disappears into the past. The festive season, as short as it is, just seems to provide temporary respite from the day-to-day issues of the world and the problems that each of us experience. It would indeed be wonderful if we could retain that festive spirit just a little longer.

You will notice in this issue that there is a special feature highlighting the Fellowship's new Chief Executive Officer, Tony Stevenson, who commenced his duties in January. Tony has taken over the significant responsibility of managing our diverse organisation and I believe that he has the talent and the vision to lead us into the next stage of our development. On behalf of the Board, I wish to welcome Tony to our organisation and assure him that he will have our full support in achieving our organisation's objectives. I encourage everyone to welcome and support him in this task.

I would also like to formally announce that the Board has elected Bob Steele as our new Vice President. Bob is relatively new to our organisation. However, he has a wealth of experience at the most senior level with not-for-profit organisations. His creativity, experience and understanding of the sector makes him a significant asset to the work of our Board. Bob is also a Board Member of Queensland Alliance, ensuring that a strong link in the mental health sector exists with other organisations valuing similar objectives to ours.

As most members probably realise, the Fellowship is a not-for-profit organisation made up of volunteer Board members and staff who manage and perform the myriad of services, programs and activities that are the basis of our existence.

The preceding months have been very difficult. However, our members and participants quite reasonably expect stability and continuity from the Fellowship and the services that make a difference in their everyday lives. I am confident that a high

standard has been achieved and this has largely been made possible by the dedication and commitment of our staff. Without their efforts and their willingness to go the extra distance, this continuing high standard could not have been achieved. Personally, and on behalf of the Board, I wish to extend our gratitude for their strong support and the confidence they have maintained.

During the main days of the festive season, along with the vast majority of both commercial and not-for-profit organisations, our offices are closed and our telephones are not answered. In order to maintain a presence over the few days when our office is closed, our answering machine directs callers to my mobile number. I do not generally receive more than a handful of calls during this time. However, it is important to provide this personal contact to callers, as the people calling us are typically those who are at the end of their tether. These callers may have tried to access the public health system without success and eventually worked their way through the phone book until they found our number. The title of our organisation does in fact sound inviting – "fellowship" and that is probably what they most need in these desperate times. However large and complex we become, it is important that we never lose our connection with that word or what it implies.

The callers may have absolutely no idea who we are or what our vision is. However, the people that I typically speak to just want somebody to listen and point them in the right direction. The reality is, we are not in a position to do much more than listen and provide information or referral services. We cannot dispense medical advice and we have no way of checking the authenticity of what they are telling us. Nevertheless, I am convinced that this is a service (however limited) which must be maintained, as it simply fills in one more gap in the system.

There are other organisations that provide 24-hour advice services. For example, Lifeline provides services to all after hours emergency callers, while ARAFMI specifically provides assistance to mental health related callers. Collectively, not-for-profit organisations perform an excellent role but the fact that callers are relying on these services out of hours is a good indication that they are not able to access (or are not gaining satisfaction from) out of hours public health services in times of crisis.

I have made the point in my articles many times that mental illness does not observe public service hours and anyone with any experience knows that most crisis situations occur out of hours – in the middle of the night, on weekends and on public holidays (particularly those involving celebration). Hence the higher than usual number of callers to after hours numbers over the Christmas period.

The community needs improved public mental health services delivered seven days a week, 24 hours a day, in order to provide an effective service. If this service is not available within the health sector, people will rely on the police to intervene and then there is the potential for things to go very badly. Whilst the majority of such matters are handled expertly and sensitively by police officers, it must be remembered that this type of work is not their role and the vast majority of mental health crises not involving criminal behaviour should be handled within a medical framework.

All the very best for a safe and enjoyable year ahead.

Ken Meissner
President

