

Report shows ambos' despair

• *Daniel Emerson*

A spate of five paramedic suicides in 16 months could have been worse amid revelations five more St John Ambulance officers have attempted or considered taking their own life.

Two warts-and-all reports released yesterday detail SJA's "culture of bullying" and "toxic" workplace culture, painting a devastating picture of an organisation devoted to healing but which failed to take care of its own.

The documents complete a trio of reports triggered by the deaths of five paramedics between December 2013 and March last year. A review by chief psychiatrist Nathan Gibson was released in March.

The latest reports include a review of SJA's workplace mental health risks carried out by the University of Melbourne, which found 405, or 58.5 per cent, of surveyed staff reported bullying, conflict or harassment.

The final report is a review of workplace culture by an "independent oversight panel" comprising former health department director-general Neale Fong, former health minister Ian Taylor and University of Adelaide Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies director Sandy McFarlane. The reports released yesterday found paramedics were prepared to confront trauma that was part and parcel of their job but were more upset by how they were treated by the organisation in the aftermath, and by workplace stresses including inflexible rostering and bullying.

The independent panel report found "there appears to be a degree of reluctance by St John to accept the magnitude of the risk presented by the day-to-day work of paramedics", including the cumulative effect of trauma.

SJA's response to the suicide spate had been "overly and unnecessarily defensive" and many of the 100 staff who responded "illustrate a culture where bullying appears to be systemic, if not condoned".

Nine indicated they had received treatment and/or had a current clinical diagnosis for depression, anxiety or PTSD, and of them, five had considered or attempted suicide.

"Of the five, all cited their work environment as being a contributing stressor," the report said.

SJA chief executive Tony Ahern said it would implement 23 of the 27 recommendations in the panel's report. The remainder were accepted in part or were up to the Government. Only one was not supported.

Mr Ahern said SJA had addressed some of the issues raised and was committed to improvement.

United Voice union secretary Carolyn Smith said the reports were an opportunity to "transform" SJA's culture.

If you or someone you know is thinking of suicide, call Lifeline on 13 11 14