

Transcript

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Compere: **GEOFF HUTCHISON** Summary ID: **X00067477974**
Item: **INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN SMITH, UNITED VOICE, ABOUT THE SUSPECTED SUICIDES OF ST JOHN AMBULANCE PARAMEDICS.**
INTERVIEWEE: CAROLYN SMITH, UNITED VOICE

Audience:	Male 16+ 20000	Female 16+ 25000	All people 45000
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GEOFF HUTCHISON: Going back to December of 2013, this program began reporting on the suspected suicides of St John Ambulance paramedics. Five deaths were reported between that time and March of 2015. These people are our first responders, the people who pick up the pieces when we crash our cars, who talk us to safety when we put ourselves in harm's way, who work to keep us alive. And we were to learn that many of them are struggling under the burden of that responsibility, that they are particularly vulnerable to developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, they suffer at rates double the general population and higher than police officers or firefighters. And they've had, and at times, very difficult relationship with their employer, St John Ambulance. Now those stories, that testimony led to a great deal of public anger, political interest, and now there have been three inquiries, the last of which released findings on Friday afternoon.

And those findings described an element of culture within St John as toxic as dysfunctional, and that bullying and other inappropriate behaviours were

occurring at all levels, and that when St John had to respond to those five suicides, its attitude was overly and unnecessarily defensive and reactive.

Well the Independent Oversight Panel, headed by Dr Neale Fong made 24 findings, 27 recommendations to improve the relationship. After nine we'll hear from St John CEO Tony Ahern. Before that, Carolyn Smith from the United Voice, the union representing those paramedics.

Carolyn Smith, good morning to you.

CAROLYN SMITH:

Good morning Geoff, and look, before we start I do want to say on behalf of our members, we really appreciate the fact that you've been so interested in this issue and have really pushed it so hard.

GEOFF HUTCHISON:

Well it's interesting, we wouldn't have pushed it hard if we hadn't heard as much testimony from these paramedics, probably more than anything of its like that I've ever seen. So tell our audience, Carolyn Smith, where's the good news in this report?

CAROLYN SMITH:

Well look, I think the good news in this report is - and I have to say, St John's doesn't come out looking very special from this report, but I think the good news in this report is it really vindicates our members. It vindicates what they've been saying for three years, which is there's an inherent psychological risk in their job, and St John is not recognising this sufficiently and things need to change. And we think it's a really measured and well considered report, and we really

welcome the recommendations. We think they're good recommendations.

GEOFF HUTCHISON:

Are you satisfied that after three inquiries that paramedics can have faith that they will be better treated and better understood by their employer, and to be fair to St John, I think St John now understand better that the inherent dangers of this job is that it makes you very vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder.

CAROLYN SMITH:

Yeah look that's right. And look, we've had three reports and now it's time for change. St Johns have certainly said they are going to accept most of the recommendations. We do think - you know, we think it's now time to make sure change is implemented, and you know, paramedics, transport officers, communication officers, people who are there for us in some of the hardest times in our lives, that we're there for them. And that we're there for them, acknowledge the risk in their job and that their employer is there for them and supports them.

GEOFF HUTCHISON:

Now, I guess that the proof of a lot of this will be that there has to be a meaningful response from St John beyond the old go and see the chaplain, or if you've got a problem ... take half an hour off and see how you're coping. Something more substantive needs to come from this, and I understand the union wants a psychological health and wellness clause in contracts?

CAROLYN SMITH:

Well look, there's a range of recommendations in terms of what's being implemented, and St John's are

talking about improving their health and wellbeing which hasn't had, I think, enough focus on PTSD and the risk of suicide. But we think with all the changes that are recommended, there needs to be some external oversight and some way to make sure St John stays on the track. They haven't had a great reputation for taking this stuff seriously. We think they are now, but we think they can't just be left to implement this themselves.

So there's really two things. One is ensuring that the contract - and this is the recommendation - includes requirements, KPIs around psychological health and wellbeing, and the second is that the implementation committee- that there be an implementation committee. That's the final recommendation, but that that implementation committee not just be St John's, that it has workforce representatives, and that is going to happen. But also that it has external people, and we think it's time for the Government to take a bit of responsibility. It's time for John Day and Colin Barnett to step up to the plate. This is a public service. It's a contract with the Government, and the Government really needs to be involved in making sure this report is implemented fully.

GEOFF HUTCHISON:

Carolyn Smith, this is a question without notice, but it's going to dovetail to our next story in the program. Is there any- is there really any doubt about Alannah MacTiernan filling Labor's North Metropolitan Upper House seat, revealed by Gareth Parker in The West today?

CAROLYN SMITH: Oh look, there's a meeting of admin tonight, and I'm sure we'll work it out. But look, today we really want to talk about suicide and our members- our members at St John's. It's a huge issue. We've got this report. We really want to make sure that this happens.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: And you can be assured that I'm going to be very expansive about the topic.

CAROLYN SMITH: [Talks over] Absolutely, yes.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: But the- related to Alannah MacTiernan, the MUA are pushing for Adrian Evans to win the pre-selection. Can you address the question? Will Alannah MacTiernan be Labor's candidate, indeed Labor's member for that Upper House seat?

CAROLYN SMITH: Look, I'm sure that we'll sort it out very positively and in way that supports Mark McGowan as leader.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Thank you very much. Not a yes/no answer, by any measure.

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