



WITNESS STATEMENT OF ALISTAIR GABB

I, Alistair Gabb, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

My background

- 2 I grew up in country Victoria in Skipton, around 45 minutes west of Ballarat.
- 3 I experienced bullying throughout school including at boarding school. I was on the phone to mum and dad crying each day. I felt there was a lack of support from my school. I feel this experience has had a lasting influence on me as a person.
- 4 In my 20s and early 30s, I was in the ski industry travelling the world. Life was good. I was living the dream. After that I was probably heading down a not so great social path. I decided to come home and get some direction in my life. I came home to the family farm. That is when my problems started.
- 5 About six or seven years ago, I returned to the family farm and bought a block of land. I thought I would plant a crop and make some money, then pay the bank back. But year one into my farming career I got a letter from the Federal government saying I faced a fine of up to \$800,000 for spraying protected grasses (I had not). I also had a relationship breakdown. It was a very stressful period. I went down-hill rapidly. This triggered a few behavioural things, and a few ways of dealing with myself. For example, I was self destructive and would engage in self harming behaviour as a way of dealing with things. I would be a recluse and would shut my parents and friends out. The more reclusive I was, the more self destructive I was. This period of stress triggered these behaviours in me.

My experiences with the mental health system

- 6 I have seen a number of GPs, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists. It took a while to find someone I could connect with, and see regularly.
- 7 I first sought help from a local GP. I was diagnosed with depression and put on a mental health plan and was prescribed an anti-depressant. I didn't think there was anything wrong with me. Whether the medication works or not is not a five minute fix. I had to

wait 4-6 weeks to see if it worked. The medication didn't do much for me; it made things worse.

8 With the mental health plan, I had ten sessions with a psychologist. I was again diagnosed with depression. Ten sessions is simply not enough for a person in crisis. In my case I went through them in around ten weeks. I was fortunate that I was able to afford to see a private psychiatrist.

9 My parents could help me financially and my dad recommended I see a private psychiatrist he knew of in Melbourne. He was a call a spade a spade fellow. I told him I wanted to kill myself. He said labels put you in a box, don't put yourself in a box. He said I didn't actually have depression, I had issues but you're not depressed; you get up at 6am, you go to work and you're still functioning.

10 I felt that the Melbourne psychiatrist was good and we made some inroads. However, travel to and from these appointments was a whole day venture. I stopped seeing the Melbourne psychiatrist because it was too inconvenient and too hard to be away from my work on the farm for that long.

11 I was living by myself and could sometimes go a month without speaking to someone other than my parents or the person at the checkout at the supermarket. In my experience farmers work too hard and can be socially isolated because of the demanding nature of the work. For example, I would spend long hours working by myself, especially if there was lots of work to be done with a particular harvest. When I was working this hard I would often live off two to three hours of sleep a night.

12 I felt like I was vibrating on the inside. I started to wake up with what felt like the world's worst hangover. There was a lack of clarity; I was not thinking clearly. I would rather be dead than put up with the rot in my head, my body and my heart. I was seeking peace and quiet, seeking an exit from feeling so bad.

13 I tried to end my life a few times. The first time I didn't tell anyone. I just went back to work. Another time, I needed an ambulance. My neighbour from the next farm was the paramedic, he is really good mates with one of my mates. That is how it is living in the country.

14 I went to a hospital emergency department twice. I was taken there after a suicide attempt. On another occasion I went to emergency in the middle of the night because I knew I was getting to a point where I needed help before I did something. I arrived at emergency and was seen by a doctor and asked if I was feeling ok. I felt like I was wasting their time because I didn't have blood spurting out of me. I was asked to sign a form that said that I promised not to harm myself and I was discharged shortly after I had signed it. I was told to make sure I followed up with my doctor and psychiatrist.

- 15 At some point, I went to the public psychiatrist service attached to a hospital. The service felt fairly stereotypical of a psychiatric hospital. It was a sterile environment with high ceilings and rendered concrete walls. The building sat next to the light, bright and modern, main part of the hospital. It felt like the psychiatric service was the poor cousin or the second level of the main hospital department. I was seen by a mental health worker for an initial assessment and was then seen by a psychiatrist for a few sessions before being referred on to another psychiatrist.
- 16 The grapevine here works in wonderful ways. I've experienced a great sense of community and support. People in town know what I have been through and I walk through my town with my head held high. I have received some inconsiderate comments, but I have also been told that I am brave.
- 17 I now see a GP in Skipton who is a ripper bloke, who told me I'm bipolar and put me on lithium. I stopped taking it because I felt I better. I thought I was going fine. But a couple of months ago dad asked me if I was still on my medication. When I said that I wasn't, he said I need to start taking it again. I have been feeling good since then. I might be taking the medication for the rest of my life.
- 18 For me, it is about saying it is OK to have been there. If I help one person, to me that's a win. I went on the ABC's show You Can't Ask That in relation to Suicide Attempt Survivors. I have taken part in the digital stories project with the National Centre for Farmer Health.
- 19 I think the awareness of mental illness is growing in rural Victoria but more help is needed, especially for people in crisis. In my experience, farmers have different needs. It is a struggle to travel to Melbourne and it often not feasible to be away from the farm, especially if you need to see someone regularly.

sign here ►



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date

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