

Program to give workers tools to stop mates' suicides

Turning a tragic tide

LACHLAN LEEMING

THE hardest part about losing a workmate to suicide is the empty benches, according to Glenn Leary.

"We're just reminded of the guilt we carry when we walk past an empty bench – that was one of the hardest things," he said after losing two mates to suicide in the space of six weeks.

The 36-year manufacturing industry veteran said mental health issues in his line of work – which regularly involves "dog watch" long overnight shifts and casualisation – placed a big strain on the lives of employees, sometimes with tragic consequences.

It's why he's backing a new initiative in the long-neglected sector which will introduce a new program to support workers' mental health and prevent suicide in the coming year.

The Newcastle mining equipment manufacturer has seen first-hand the consequences of failing to address mental health in the workplace: "We lost the first guy tragically, we could tell there was shifts in his behaviour and then he didn't attend work.

"We learnt the news early one

morning. The general manager told us. We were devastated, shocked, bewildered we didn't recognise the signs.

"People blamed themselves – and six weeks later we got the news of the second guy. I had spoken to him the afternoon before, he seemed okay."

It was the news of the second death which hit all the workers hard. "There's constant reminders as well when you walk past a workbench where a colleague has always been, and suddenly he isn't," Mr Leary said.

More than 3000 Australians die from suicide a year, with men making up 75 per cent of that figure. It's the leading cause of death for those aged 15-44.

It's something Mr Leary hopes the MATES in Manufacturing program – based on the successful initiative run in the construction industry – will address. MATES in Manufacturing will deliver suicide awareness programs, workplace training focused on peer- to-peer support, along with referrals to professional services.

The pilot will be rolled out across 12 workplaces over the coming year.

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Glenn Leary lost two workmates to suicide in just six weeks.