

STATEMENT FROM MENTAL HEALTH AND COMPLEX TRAUMA EXPERTS ON ARTICLE APPEARING IN THE AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER ON MARCH 13, 2021

Media Release: 15 March 2021

We care deeply about those who have experienced mental illness, trauma and distress and we feel it is important to make a statement regarding the article that appeared in The Australian newspaper on 13 March 2021 by Janet Albrechtsen and Peter Van Onselen titled 'In her words: Kate's dossier of tragedy'.

After suggesting that some have speculated that the complainant's experience of Bipolar Disorder may have meant she imagined being raped, the piece in The Australian invites readers to 'judge for themselves' the veracity of the complainant's account.

The implication is that the complainant is not to be believed because they had experienced mental illness.

This is highly stigmatising, harmful and offensive.

Having a mental illness does not inherently make a person a less reliable witness, or their account less believable.

While not everyone who has mental ill-health has experienced trauma, we do know that trauma, including sexual violence, can lead to a wide range of mental health difficulties, not just PTSD.

What happens in response to disclosures of abuse – whether someone is believed, supported and cared for – can also impact their longer term mental health and wellbeing.

Trauma experts agree that many people do not seek help for trauma immediately and many do not make sense of their experiences until later in life. The way we make sense of and respond to trauma changes over the course of our lifetime.

The piece that appeared in The Australian has been highly distressing for many who have experienced mental illness, trauma or distress. For many, it has reminded them of difficult and distressing experiences either of their own trauma, or of having their experiences invalidated

because of their experience of mental illness.

We urge those who are commenting publicly on this issue to consider the impact that these discussions and the ongoing public narrative might be having on those directly impacted by these tragic events, as well as on the countless Australians who themselves have experiences of mental illness, trauma or distress.

Rachel Green, CEO SANE Australia said:

"I'm really disappointed to see The Australian publishing this article which clearly stigmatises people with mental illness and disregards the wider community impact of this type of commentary. People with mental illness report stigma and discrimination in the workplace, in relationships and in the broader community. Our work over the last three decades has taught us that reporting like this has the potential to add to this stigma and do great harm."

"The journalists' decision to publish deeply personal information and the private writings of a woman who is tragically no longer with us; and their suggestion that the general public should judge her on the basis of her experience of mental ill-health fails every single ethical test."

An expert in complex trauma Associate Professor Michael Salter, UNSW said:

"Trauma is a leading cause of mental illness, and people living with mental illness are particularly vulnerable to trauma. The stereotype that people living with mental illness are untrustworthy increases their risk of violence and abuse, and obstructs their fundamental rights to justice and health. The media causes serious harm to people living with mental illness when they propagate these stereotypes."

Anyone looking for information, support and guidance from mental health professionals can contact the SANE Help Centre on 1800 187 263 or [This email address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it.](#) from 10am-10pm AEST Monday to Friday. For anyone in crisis, please call:

- Lifeline [13 11 14](#)
- Suicide Call Back Line [1800 659 467](#)
- Mensline [1300 789 978](#)
- KidsHelpline [1800 551 800](#)

ENDS

Contact: Bianca Lapins, Senior PR and Media Advisor, 0439 708 381, [This email address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it.](#)

ABOUT SANE AUSTRALIA

SANE Australia is a national mental health charity dedicated to making a real difference in the lives of people affected by complex mental health issues through support, research and advocacy. SANE's vision is for an Australia where people affected by complex mental health issues live long and fulfilling lives, free from stigma and discrimination. SANE Support Services include phone and online counselling and online forums for people with a lived experience of complex mental health issues, their friends and family members.

ABOUT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR MICHAEL SALTER

Dr Michael Salter is the Scientia Associate Professor of Criminology at the School of Social Sciences at UNSW and an expert in child sexual exploitation and gendered violence. Michael applies critical and feminist theory to the study of complex trauma, with a focus on intersections with technology. Michael sits on the Board of Directors of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation, and he is an advisor to the Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection and White Ribbon Australia. He is Associate Editor of *Child Abuse Review* and sits on the editorial board of the *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation*.