

National Communications Charter

**A unified approach to mental health
and suicide prevention**



Life in Mind



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Everymind acknowledges the Traditional Owners of
Country throughout Australia. We pay our respects
to Elders past and present.

Everymind also acknowledges those with a lived
experience of mental ill-health and suicide. We
remember those we have lost to suicide.

Thank you to the current and former Champions
who contributed significantly to the redevelopment
of the National Communications Charter
(The Charter).

Foreword

Australia has made great progress in improving mental health awareness and suicide prevention, but we still have a way to go. One in five Australians will experience a mental illness each year – that’s millions of people who need support, treatment and a tailored roadmap to recovery.

As Former Chair of the National Mental Health Commission, I’ve seen firsthand how important it is to have a cumulative approach to the awareness of mental health and suicide prevention. Clarity, consistency and collaboration are vital if we want to maximise our efforts.

Australia is fortunate to have a host of organisations across different levels contributing to improving mental health, increasing awareness of mental illness and eliminating associated stigma. But with such a variety of players in the one field, the need for consistency becomes greater.

By guiding the way we talk about mental health and suicide prevention, with each other and the community, the National Communications Charter (The Charter) serves as a valuable resource for the work we all do.

It combines our efforts and streamlines our vision for greater awareness and better mental health and wellbeing.

A commitment to The Charter is a commitment to how we can all talk about our nation’s mental health and wellbeing.

Uniting organisations across sectors, whether it be government, business or communities, maximises the incredible efforts currently underway in the mental health space.

I encourage everyone working in the mental health and suicide prevention sectors, as well as government, workplaces and community groups, to sign up to The Charter and align their work with its guiding principles and key messages.

Communicating in ways that promote awareness and encourage people to seek help is the first step in assisting those one in five Australians now and into the future.

Lucy Brogden

Former Chair, National Mental Health Commission



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For a charter to be a purposeful document, people need to believe in it, be prepared to sign it and genuinely strive to meet its guidelines. Without your buy-in and commitment, it becomes another piece of paper on the shelf - and they don't save lives!

BRONWEN EDWARDS
ROSES IN THE OCEAN

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About

National Communications Charter

The National Communications Charter (The Charter) is an evidence-informed resource to guide the way mental health and suicide prevention sectors, government, business and community talk about mental ill-health and suicide.

Signing The Charter serves as a formal commitment to use safe and consistent language when discussing mental ill-health and suicide. It is an agreement to put the eight principles into practice in order to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking.

The Charter is hosted on the *Life in Mind* digital portal: lifeinmind.org.au

Importance of The Charter

Mental ill-health and suicide are complex and multifaceted, and the language we use can contribute to stigma and alienate members of the community.

Safe communication plays a role in reducing stigma and increasing help-seeking behaviour.

The Charter aims to increase understanding of mental health, social and emotional wellbeing, mental ill-health and suicide, and guides how these concepts can be safely discussed in workplaces and the community.



Stigmatising language can prevent people from seeking help, so improving our communication around mental ill-health and suicide is vital.

SALLY MORRIS
OPEN DOORS YOUTH SERVICE





Clear, consistent communication is so important for our communities. We have a responsibility to speak with one voice and provide respectful, consistent, evidence-based information.

NADEAN WELLER
THE ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL



Signing and actioning The Charter

Mental health and suicide prevention sectors, government, business and community groups are encouraged to sign and action The Charter through the following steps:

- 1. Understand the eight principles and become a signatory**
- 2. Action the principles and promote The Charter**
- 3. Evaluate the implementation of The Charter in your workplace.**

Background

The Charter was originally developed in 2014 by organisations who communicate regularly with the community and with the support of the National Mental Health Commission.

It was redeveloped and operationalised in 2018, under the guidance of the *Life in Mind* Champions who represent the following groups:

- Mental health and suicide prevention sectors
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- LGBTIQ+
- Culturally and linguistically diverse
- Lived and living experience of suicide
- Lived and living experience of mental ill-health.

The eight principles

1

Make mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention a national priority.

2

Share nationally consistent information and messages.

3

Base advocacy and awareness-raising efforts on clear, consistent, and evidence-based messages.

4

Respect the diversity of experience of those affected by mental ill-health or suicide.

5

Use appropriate, respectful and person-centred language in all communication.

6

Work together to maximise our efforts and resources.

7

Acknowledge those with lived experience of mental ill-health or suicide and incorporate into policy and service design.

8

Promote crisis services and help-seeking information.



“

It is only through working together that we can inspire more Australians to have genuine life-changing conversations and move closer to our vision of a world where everyone is connected and protected from suicide.

BRENDAN MAHER
ST JOHN AMBULANCE AUSTRALIA

”

Areas of national importance

Australia recognises the following areas of national importance¹ which are in line with The Charter principles:

- Mental health
- Social and emotional wellbeing
- Mental ill-health
- Suicide prevention.

These four areas are determined by multiple and interacting social, cultural, psychological and biological factors, at individual, family and community levels, as well as broader social and institutional levels.



“

The Charter’s guiding principles and key messages underpin the life-saving work of increasing help-seeking behaviours and reducing the stigma surrounding suicide.

CHEZ CURNOW
COUNTRY SA PHN

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Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health is a positive concept that is sometimes misunderstood and used to refer to mental ill-health.

It is about wellness rather than illness and relates to feeling resilient, enjoying life and being able to connect with others.

Mental health increases the ability of people and communities to realise goals and potential, to cope with the normal stress of everyday life, to work productively and to contribute to society.²

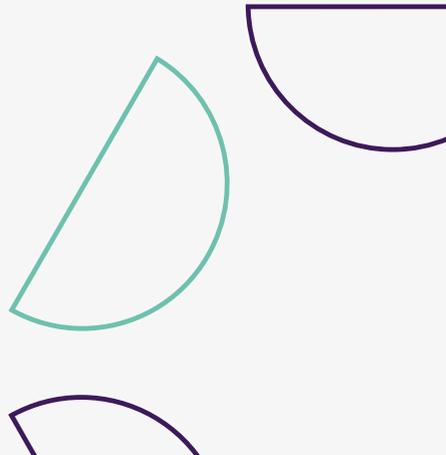
Mental health can be supported and maintained through a combination of protective factors such as positive relationships and connections to community, cultural identity, physical activity, creative expression, a sense of purpose, financial security, availability of opportunities and others.

The promotion of mental health and wellbeing is in every person's interest. We can all do something to promote mental health, including building healthy public policy, creating supportive environments, strengthening communities to take action, developing personal skills and reorienting services.³



Mental health and wellbeing crosses language and cultural divides. Supporting individuals and families holistically and in partnership, we build stronger communities that flourish as a whole.

MARIA CASSANITI
NSW TRANSCULTURAL MENTAL HEALTH CENTRE





Being mentally healthy is important to all Australians, whether or not they also live with a mental illness. It is about being able to deal with life's stressors, realising our potential and belonging to and contributing to the communities in which we live.

DR AARON GROVES
CHIEF PSYCHIATRIST TASMANIA



Key messages:

- Optimal mental health and wellbeing requires an approach that addresses the whole person, acknowledging the interconnection of mental health, physical health, social connections, sense of identity and other aspects.
- Protective factors enhance and protect mental health and reduce the likelihood that mental ill-health will occur.
- Protective factors can operate at individual, family and community levels as well as at broader social, cultural and institutional levels.
- Addressing systems and processes that enable social exclusion, invisibility and stigma to occur can help reduce exposure to risk factors and support mental health and wellbeing.

Social and emotional wellbeing

Social and emotional wellbeing is the basis for both physical and mental health for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.*

This holistic concept includes but extends beyond conventional concepts of mental health and mental illness. It recognises the importance of cultural determinants of health such as relationships with family, kin and community, and connections to land and sea, culture, spirituality and ancestry, as well as social determinants such as employment, housing and education.⁴

The *Gayaa Dhuwi (Proud Spirit) Declaration* outlines the importance of social and emotional wellbeing for improving the mental health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This includes the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership and to include the concept across all parts of the Australian mental health system.⁵

The following are guiding principles that shape the concept of social and emotional wellbeing:

1. Health as holistic
2. The right to self-determination
3. The need for cultural understanding
4. The impact of history in trauma and loss
5. Recognition of human rights
6. The impact of racism and stigma
7. Recognition of the centrality of kinship
8. Recognition of cultural diversity
9. Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strengths.⁶

*Note: While social and emotional wellbeing is discussed in the literature as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept, the term may also be used by other people and groups who have different concepts of mental health and mental ill-health.



Key messages:

- Social and emotional wellbeing is tied to social, emotional, spiritual and cultural areas of life.
- Health is holistic not only in the sense of being about the whole person; it is also about whole communities.
- Social and emotional wellbeing includes, but extends beyond conventional concepts of mental health and mental illness.
- Factors that protect the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and are a source of potential strength and resilience include: connection to land, culture, spirituality and ancestry, kinship, self-determination, community governance and cultural continuity.⁷

Mental ill-health

Mental ill-health is a broad term that includes both mental illness and mental health issues.

A mental illness is a disorder diagnosed by a medical professional that significantly interferes with a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities. Examples include depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and eating disorders.

These can all occur with varying degrees of severity.⁸

A mental health issue can reduce a person's cognitive, emotional or social abilities, but not to the extent that it meets the criteria for a mental illness diagnosis. These issues can result from life stressors and often resolve with time or when the individual's situation changes.

A mental health issue may develop into a mental illness if it persists or increases in severity.⁹

Mental ill-health can have personal, social and economic costs for individuals, families and communities. This can include social isolation, relationship breakdowns, unemployment and undue financial stress, homelessness, social stigma and other forms of discrimination.¹⁰

Recovery is different for every person with mental illness. With no single definition, recovery is best described as a process, sometimes ongoing and lifelong, defined and led by the person with the illness, through which they can achieve independence, self-esteem and a meaningful and contributing life in the community.¹¹



People with lived experience should see The Charter as a rock solid foundation to develop generations of teamwork. It says, you are worthwhile and you are necessary.

CAMERON SOLNORDAL
SANE AUSTRALIA



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The Charter gives organisations a great foundation to work from as it defines and recognises that mental health is a positive concept and that mental ill-health doesn't discriminate.

DAVID BURROUGHS
WESTPAC

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Key messages:

- The prevention of mental ill-health is in the interests of every person, community and government.
- Mental ill-health impacts people of all ages and from all walks of life.
- People living with mental illness can and do lead full and meaningful lives.
- Mental ill-health is not always visible.
- Seeking help early leads to improved outcomes and can reduce future issues.
- Reducing discrimination, stigma and prejudice can encourage people to seek help.
- Many factors contribute to help-seeking and recovery, including access to treatment, addressing barriers to participation and inclusion in society, safety, strong relationships and financial security.
- Support for people with mental ill-health and the people who care for them can reduce feelings of isolation.
- People can have needs that are specific to their identity or community. It is also important to recognise that people can have multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities and communities that can affect their ability to understand or seek help for mental ill-health in themselves or others.

Suicide prevention

The reasons for suicide are complex and multifaceted, influenced by the vulnerabilities, risk factors and events in a person's life and their interactions with other social, cultural, economic and environmental factors.¹²

Discussions surrounding suicide can cover a range of behaviours including thinking about suicide (ideation), planning a suicide, attempting suicide and taking one's own life.

Not everyone who dies by suicide has a mental illness, although some people may have an increased risk of suicide because of a diagnosed mental illness.¹³

The relationship between suicide and self-harm is also complex. Research shows many people who self-harm do not have suicidal thoughts at the time but all may be considered to have a higher risk of further, more severe self-harm and later suicide.¹⁴

Despite the complexity of addressing the causes and contributing factors of suicide, what is clear is that it has a profound impact not only on the person who is suicidal but also their family, friends, carers, workplaces, schools and communities.

Suicide prevention aims to decrease the number of people who die by suicide or attempt suicide each year. Prevention efforts focus on reducing risk factors for suicide and enhancing protective factors that may prevent suicide and suicidal behaviour.

“
It is vital for the community to work together to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide and to support those left behind and a key way to do this is by finding ways to communicate openly and honestly about suicide and its impact.
”

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR JO ROBINSON
ORYGEN

Key messages:

- Suicide is preventable.
- Suicide prevention is in the interests of every person, community and government.
- Every suicide is a tragedy with far-reaching, long lasting, significant impact on individuals, families, workplaces and communities.
- The reasons for suicide are complex and multifaceted.
- Suicide is not always connected to mental illness.
- Reducing discrimination, stigma and prejudice associated with suicidal behaviour and those impacted can encourage people to seek help.
- All suicidal behaviour should be taken seriously.
- Communities can play a critical role in suicide prevention by giving people a sense of belonging or a feeling of connectedness, reducing stigma, developing their skills to support someone in crisis and providing social support or referrals to appropriate services.
- Similar to mental ill-health, people can have needs that are specific to their identity or community. It is also important to recognise that people can have multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles and responsibilities within communities, which can affect how they understand and seek help for suicidal behaviours in themselves or others.





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The Charter aims to build the capacity of all sectors and people to play a role in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing and the prevention of suicide.

DR JAELEA SKEHAN OAM
EVERYMIND

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Actioning The Charter

The National Communications Charter (The Charter) will help guide ongoing efforts to improve mental health and wellbeing, and the way mental ill-health and suicide is spoken about within an organisation and with key stakeholders.

The Charter principles

Example activities

1

Make mental health, wellbeing and suicide prevention a priority issue

- Promote mindfulness and physical activity.
- Create flexibility around working arrangements (e.g. start times, rostered days off).
- Encourage staff to work together on tasks, share skills and ideas, and get involved in social activities.
- Build a safe workplace culture (e.g. anti-bullying policies in place).
- Provide resources to staff about self-care and positive coping strategies.
- Actively engage in [R U OK? Day](#) and [World Mental Health Day](#).

2

Share nationally consistent information and messages

- Update organisational social media guidelines to reflect The Charter principles.
- Regularly review all printed and online content (e.g. eNewsletters, website, brochures, posters, etc.) to ensure all messaging that touches on mental health, mental illness or suicide is safe and responsible.

3

Base advocacy and awareness-raising efforts on clear, consistent and evidence-based messages

- Encourage stakeholders and other partnering agencies to become signatories of The Charter.
- Collaborate with others to action and support community awareness campaigns.
- Provide resources that support positive messaging, and break down common stereotypes about mental ill-health and suicide.
- Utilise evidence-based resources as a guide to increase staff confidence when it comes to talking about suicide.

4

Respect the diversity of experience for those affected by mental ill-health or suicide

- Consider staff who may be at a higher risk of experiencing stress or mental ill-health and provide additional support as needed.
- Have support processes in place if a staff member indicates they are impacted by or experiencing mental ill-health or suicidal crisis.
- Support staff to stay at work, or return-to-work programs that might include modified job, work schedule or duties.
- Consider conducting wellbeing checks as part of regular reviews with staff.

5

Use appropriate, respectful and person-centred language in all communication

- Provide avenues for staff to have input into safe communication practices and information sharing.
- Embed The Charter and [language guides](#) into staff orientation processes.
- Incorporate a strength-based approach in any communication to both staff and customers regarding mental health and suicide prevention.

6

Work together to maximise efforts and resources

- Promote The Charter principles to other organisations and the broader community (e.g. hosting an R U OK? Day event, World Mental Health Day morning tea).
- Facilitate regular collaborative planning days etc. with staff on actioning workplace mental health initiatives, and tracking progress.
- Provide staff the opportunity to attend mental health and suicide prevention training and/or community-based activities (e.g. Mental Health First Aid, local charity events etc.).

7

Acknowledge those with lived experience of mental ill-health and suicide and incorporate into policy and service design

- Develop or review policies and guidelines that support staff with a lived experience of mental illness and suicide (e.g. flexible working hours).
- Incorporate acknowledgements of the importance of the voice and role of lived experience at the start of meetings, and in relevant workplace policy documents.
- Organise information sessions or training for staff on co-design principles (e.g. from [Roses in the Ocean](#)).
- Incorporate a peer support group within the workplace (see SuperFriend [Peer Support Booklet](#) for further information).
- Develop flexible sick leave policies that encourage staff to feel comfortable to use their leave for both mental health as well as physical health issues.

8

Promote crisis services and help-seeking information

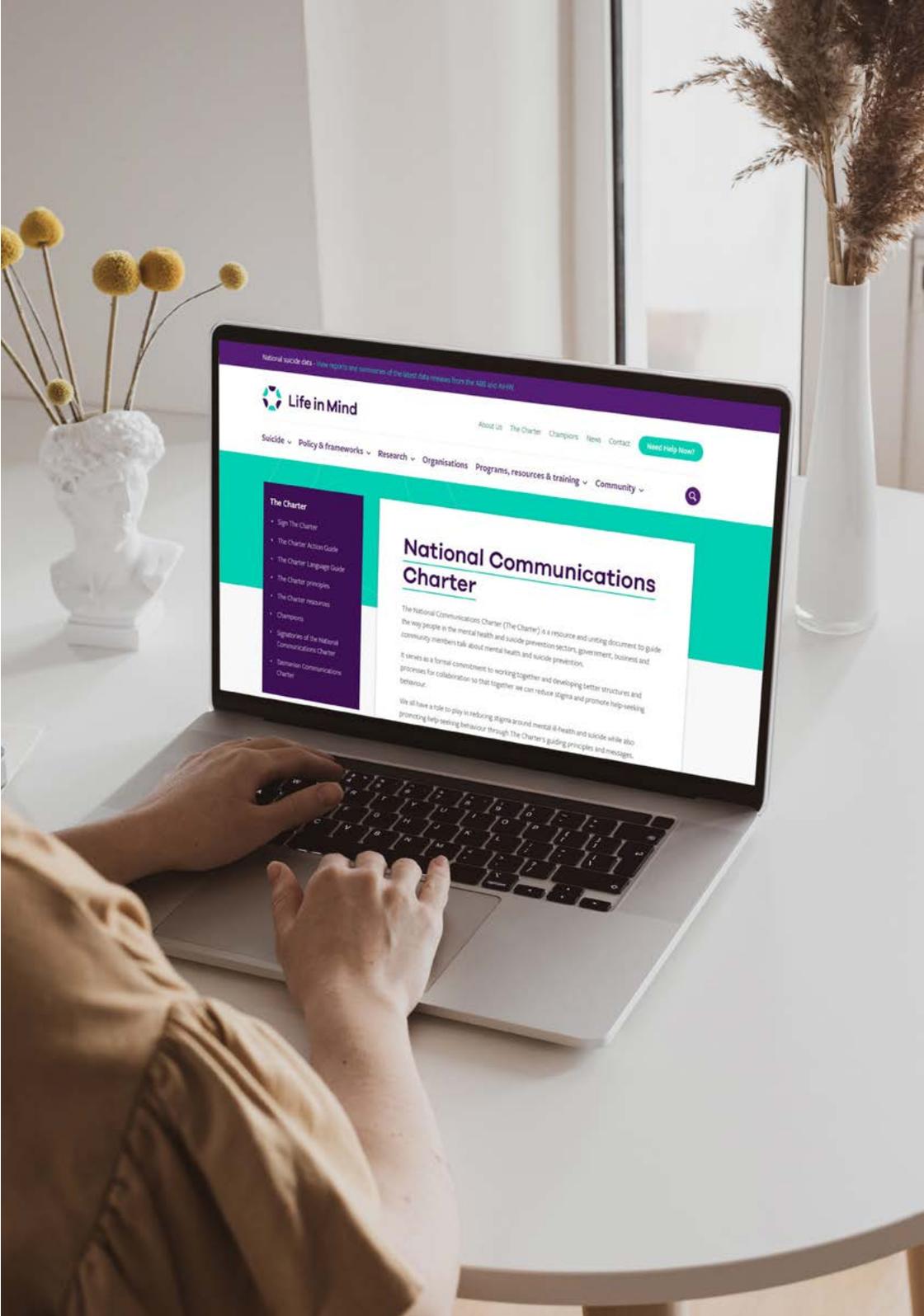
- Develop capabilities of management and staff by offering Mental Health First Aid training and suicide prevention training (such as [ASIST](#)) to provide the skills to assist someone experiencing a mental health issue and identify the warning signs of someone at risk of suicide.
- Develop appropriate policies to respond to traumatic incidents that may arise.
- Provide internal and external mental health supports (e.g. EAP, HR, peer supporters, GP Mental Health Treatment Plan), promote the confidentiality of these programs and ensure the pathway to accessing support is clear.
- Make help-seeking information visible for staff and in public areas, such as waiting rooms.

References and notes

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National suicide dies - View reports and summaries of the latest data reviews from the ADS and AuM



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The Charter

- Sign The Charter
- The Charter Action Guide
- The Charter Language Guide
- The Charter principles
- The Charter resources
- Champions
- Signatories of the National Communications Charter
- Termination Communications Charter

National Communications Charter

The National Communications Charter (The Charter) is a resource and writing document to guide the way people in the mental health and suicide prevention sectors, government, business and community members talk about mental health and suicide prevention.

It serves as a formal commitment to working together and developing better structures and processes for collaboration so that together we can reduce stigma and promote help-seeking behaviour.

We all have a role to play in reducing stigma around mental ill health and suicide while also promoting help-seeking behaviour through the Charter's guiding principles and messages.

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A commitment to The Charter is a commitment to how we can all talk about our nation's mental health and wellbeing. Uniting organisations across sectors, whether it be government, business or communities maximises the incredible efforts currently underway in the mental health space.

LUCY BROGDEN
NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION

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