



27 November 2023

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Tēnā koe e te rangatira

### **Netsafe briefing to incoming Minister of Health - online harm and mental health**

Congratulations on your election and appointment to the Health portfolio. You're likely to be scanning briefings from officials to inform your thinking on priorities. As you do, please consider our briefing on online harm alongside briefings from your departments. As Minister of Health you have levers at your disposal to ensure the health system understands the connections between online harm and mental health, and that support is available when online harm becomes a mental health issue for people.

The attached briefing to incoming Ministers tells you about Netsafe, the work we do with government and community, and rising levels of online harm in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this letter we focus on issues for the Health portfolio, and the areas where we think you can make a difference.

#### *Online harm and mental health*

Technology-facilitated abuse and online harm (such as cyber-bullying, stalking, and image based sexual abuse) can quickly become a mental health issue, especially for young people. There are also strong links between heavy social media use and increased risk of depression and anxiety. Many of the calls to the Netsafe hotline concern psychological, emotional and physical harm.

Netsafe also receives calls from, or about, youth at risk of self-harm or suicide. International research shows that children involved in cyber bullying are much more likely view web content containing self-harm and suicide. In Aotearoa New Zealand there is growing concern about cyber-bullying as a "background factor" in New Zealand's high youth suicide rate.

Sadly, Netsafe takes on average 8-10 suicide contacts per week and increasingly has become involved in coronial matters. Through the coronial process it has been recommended that Netsafe take a more active role in awareness, education and prevention when it comes to youth suicide and social media issues. For example by issuing public warnings about trending [social media challenges](#) that are harmful and can result in death. Unfortunately our current funding envelope and government contracts have no linkages to suicide prevention and coronial matters or anything to do with the health sector.

We are also seeing a growing connection between eating disorders, body image and social media. Netsafe with Ministry of Justice funding has co-funded with the Classification Office research to better understand body image related harms. Field work has just been completed with a final report due for release in early 2024.

### *How you can make a difference*

The current Child Youth and Well-being Strategy mentions social media only once across 82 pages stating that young people need support to navigate the challenges of real and online relationships and online bullying at page 52 (<https://www.childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/resources/child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy>). More needs to be said and done about the health impacts of social media on young people.

You can help prevent online harm becoming a mental health issue in two ways. By funding research to better understand the issue, and funding programmes that provide support to the people experiencing mental health issues from online harm. Government funding support for the following initiatives could make a big difference:

- Resourcing the Netsafe helpline to deal with mental health issues. This would involve the appointment of two triage nurses to triage and signpost callers to mental health support. Calls concerning potential youth suicide and other mental health issues require specialist skills that Netsafe is not currently resourced to provide. Our experience is that getting immediate support for people at risk of self-harm or suicide is currently not well signposted.
- Research to address content that sexualises children or depicts self-harm and suicide violence against children.
- Improving access and support for victims of cyberbullying and their families, through mental health support such as counselling.
- Pilot of NetSafe's whitelabelling of the health and well-being platform, Ignite, to give callers to Netsafe experiencing serious psychological, and emotional distress access to three sessions of therapy to improve mental health outcomes.

We also recommend you talk to the Minister for ACC about allowing victims of intimate partner image abuse (revenge porn) access to ACC. This [article](#) talks about how difficult it is to get ACC support currently.

### *A meeting to discuss*

Netsafe would very much appreciate a meeting with you to introduce ourselves and discuss online harm and mental health. Barb Wright, our Executive Assistant can be contacted at [barbw@netsafe.org.nz](mailto:barbw@netsafe.org.nz) and by phone +64 21 925 910 and can make meeting arrangements.

Congratulations again and I look forward to working with you and the incoming Government.

Ngā manaakitanga

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Brent Carey  
Chief Executive Officer