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MEDIA RELEASE – Mental Health in the Construction Industry

The New Zealand Construction Industry has the highest percentage of suicide for employed men of any industry in this country. Most of those interviewed as part of a recent BRANZ study, while surprised at the high suicide rate, agreed there was a key driver to the high rates - the poor culture. Described as “macho” and “bullying” and including intolerance of diversity, the culture was seen to significantly contribute to poor mental health of construction industry workers.

The impact on worksite safety of poor mental health is high, with presenteeism being seen as a major health and safety risk for those working on site.

Internationally research shows the construction industry suffers from higher rates of suicide and mental health issues compared to the general population or other industries. Research undertaken in Australia indicates construction workers are six times more likely to die by suicide than in a workplace accident. As a result, countries such as Australia, the UK and the USA have implemented initiatives to reduce suicide and improve mental health as a fundamental part of health and safety.

Fifteen people were interviewed on the issue of the state of mental health in the New Zealand building and construction industry for the BRANZ scoping study. Respondents cited several potential contributing factors for the high suicide rates including:

- a culture of toxic masculinity sets the tone for everything else that happens within the industry – the “take a concrete pill and harden up” attitude among the workforce
- the high-pressure nature of the industry (boom and bust cycles etc)
- drug and alcohol use
- well-informed customers demanding more
- a high-risk worker population
- an undervalued career path
- intergenerational issues on worksites
- intolerance of diversity.

The boom-bust cycle of the industry and the resulting pressure was also seen as a significant contributing factor. Interestingly, those interviewed said the boom cycle was seen as the most stressful, with a statement made by one participant that “the boom cycle breaks people”. This is because of the pressure to deliver quickly and in quantity.

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BRANZ General Manager Industry Research Dr Chris Litten said poor mental health or distress drives workers away from their jobs in the form of absenteeism and presenteeism or leaving the industry entirely. This results in lower productivity and increasing costs, reinforcing a vicious cycle of pressure and stress.

“Some of those interviewed noted some positive changes happening within industry but there was a unanimous call for more research to understand the factors behind the high rates of suicide,” Dr Litten said.

In the meantime, there is discussion within the construction industry on further trialling the Australian support programme Mates in Construction in New Zealand.

For queries about this research study or the work we do at BRANZ, please contact:

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Note:

The BRANZ report Mental Health in the construction industry scoping study is available for download

Mates in Construction is implemented directly through individual company or organisation and is already in place in Nelson and Timaru.

BRANZ has also funded Andy Walmsley through a BRANZ scholarship to undertake his PhD looking at: *The Right Tool for The Job: An Investigation into Help-Seeking Behaviours Among Men within the New Zealand Construction Industry.*