

Anorexic teenager in New Zealand starves to death alone

Tom Peters
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Radio New Zealand (RNZ), the public broadcaster, reported last week that a teenager with anorexia starved to death in a motel that was being used as emergency accommodation for homeless people.

The horrific death occurred more than two years ago, in January 2023, shortly after Alex had turned 17 years old. According to RNZ reporter Ruth Hill, the teenager kept his parents “at a distance on the grounds they did not accept the teen was transgender—an identity the parents say the teen later abandoned.” The parents saw Alex as female and referred to him as Vanessa. A subsequent article published by the Webworm blog, however, quoted numerous online comments from the teenager, establishing that he identified as male and as Alex.

Alex had been hospitalised 10 times and was known to multiple public health and welfare agencies and charitable organisations. He had also been diagnosed with autism.

RNZ reported that “In January 2019, when she was 13, a Family Court judge put Vanessa under a compulsory treatment order, at the recommendation of her doctors.” Alex’s relationship with his parents broke down and, at age 16, he moved away from them, first staying with a friend’s family and later in emergency accommodation.

In April 2022, nine months before Alex’s death, a court lifted the compulsory treatment order at the request of the Child, Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), despite the objections of his parents, who feared that he would die. Alex was allowed to live independently, with no proper supervision, despite clear signs that his condition was deteriorating.

A few days before he died, Alex collapsed from exhaustion in front of social workers for Presbyterian Support (a government-contracted service provider).

Even this did not trigger immediate intervention, only a doctor’s appointment booked for the following week. By then he was already dead.

His mother told RNZ: “I do not understand why no-one called an ambulance that day. How can it be that a child collapses in front of all these people and no-one calls an ambulance?”

The teenager had been dead for two days when his body was found in the motel room, weighing just 30 kilograms. A date for a coroner’s inquiry has still not been set.

The fact that a vulnerable, extremely unwell person, who was not yet an adult, was left alone to starve to death is an outrageous scandal.

It is an indictment of the Labour Party-led government of Jacinda Ardern, which was in office at the time. Among its many hollow election pledges in 2017, Labour promised to improve mental health services, especially for young people, who have the highest suicide rate in the OECD.

Ardern is currently promoting her book about “kindness” and “empathetic leadership,” *A Different Kind of Power*, which is being glorified by the world’s media. This is a scam. Her government oversaw rising social inequality, child poverty, homelessness, and a profound public health and mental health crisis.

The situation worsened in 2022 as the government removed public health measures preventing the spread of COVID-19, leading many hospitals to be swamped.

The number of people getting specialist mental health treatment decreased. Figures released last year confirmed that “in 2022/23 only 3.4 percent of the population accessed a specialist service compared to 3.8 percent in 2018/19, representing more than 9300 fewer people using specialist services,” according to RNZ.

On June 5, 2022, *Stuff* reported that people with eating disorders were unable to access services. Genevieve Mora, from a support group Voices of Hope, said: “There are some really desperate families out there. People take this step to ask for help, and are met with a six-month wait list. For some people it can be really damaging, and being turned away once is enough for them to not ask for help again.”

Stuff highlighted the case of 25-year-old anorexia sufferer Kate Van Elswijk, who had spent 18 months on the Auckland District Health Board’s waiting list for specialist treatment. At the time, the average wait time for eating disorder services in Auckland was 61 days, in Christchurch it was 114 days and in Wellington 80 days for a first specialist appointment.

On December 21, 2023, RNZ reported “a massive drop in referrals for mental health disorders over the past eight years.” Official figures showed that referrals for specialist treatment for mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar, dropped from 11,000 to about 3,000.

The broadcaster spoke with Keira Lusby, who had suffered from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and anorexia, stemming from sexual abuse as a young child. Lusby was only able to finally get a referral to CAMHS at the age of 16 because she attempted suicide.

“It seems like the mental health system and everyone involved don’t want to hear about it unless you are on death’s door,” Lusby said.

The New Zealand College of Psychiatrists explained that the crisis stemmed in part from a major shortage of qualified psychiatrists, and called on the government to increase funding so more could be trained, to no avail. The number of psychiatrists employed in the public system dropped from 518 to 497 between September 2022 and September 2024.

This is the context in which CAMHS decided to recommend ending Alex’s compulsory treatment order. Like many other people suffering severe mental health issues, he ended up in emergency housing and his condition rapidly worsened.

No politicians from the Labour Party or the current National Party-led government have commented on this tragic and avoidable death. Nor have any of the public agencies that were involved with Alex. All of them told RNZ they could not comment ahead of the coronial

inquiry.

The far-right Platform podcast, which is aligned with the government, responded to the RNZ report by demonising transgender people. In a deranged and hateful rant, the podcast’s host Sean Plunket declared that Alex had been “captured by the Rainbow/trans ideologues inside our education system” and was “encouraged to reject her family.” He blamed the teenager’s death on “the evils of the transgender cult.”

For years, the Platform has been spreading the far-right conspiracy theory that children are being indoctrinated or “groomed” to change their gender.

According to RNZ, one psychiatrist who had known Alex for years doubted that he was transgender, and told his parents it was a pretence to cover-up his anorexia. Other healthcare professionals and friends believed that Alex was transgender.

Plunket and other extreme right-wingers—including the NZ First Party, a member of the coalition government—are using transgender people as scapegoats and to foment divisions in the working class. Their aim is to deflect blame from the capitalist system and successive governments, which are responsible for plunging working people into poverty and gutting public healthcare and other life-saving services—all of which contributes to the mental health crisis that is destroying young people’s lives.



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