

Megan Mitchell

National Children's Commissioner,  
Human Rights Commission

Catherine Cocciolone

**RE: Submission on Intentional self harm and suicidal behaviour in children**

Dear Ms Mitchell,

My son Julian Cocciolone (aged 19) committed suicide on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2009 during treatment with the acne drug Roaccutane. This drug has a 30 year association with depression, suicide ideation and suicide completion. The pharmaceutical company that manufactures Roaccutane (Roche) has promoted the use of the drug as a first line treatment for mild and moderate acne (e.g. Cooper AJ, Aus J Dermatol 2003 and advertising material to dermatologists), despite MIMS recommendations (file attached) and the known association with depression and suicide.

Our son had normal teenage acne and did not meet the recommended criteria for treatment with this drug (i.e. as a second line treatment for severe nodulo-cystic acne).

Julian was an intelligent, high functioning university student with no previous history of depression or mental illness when he commenced Roaccutane treatment. He was given two consecutive 16 week courses of the drug despite developing signs of an adverse drug reaction early on in his first course. During the last months of his second course of treatment, Julian developed a major depressive disorder which ended with his death by suicide on 14th April 2009.

Adverse drug reactions are known for many drugs (see [http://www.rch.org.au/pharmacy/drug\\_information/Adverse\\_Drug\\_Reaction\\_ADR\\_Reporting/](http://www.rch.org.au/pharmacy/drug_information/Adverse_Drug_Reaction_ADR_Reporting/)) and are a major cause of morbidity, increased hospital stay and death. There is currently no diagnostic test for determining which adolescents will have adverse reactions to Roaccutane. Roche describes depression as an *idiosyncratic* reaction, however we have uncovered considerable anecdotal evidence that depression is a common side-effect of this drug (de-identified information can be provided on request). Prescribing this drug to healthy teenagers with mild or moderate acne (a non-life threatening condition), seems like playing Russian roulette with the life and mental health of a vulnerable patient cohort.

There are many issues surrounding Julian's treatment, development of depression, suicide and events that occurred after his death, but our main concerns are:

- 1) Julian's adverse drug reactions to Roaccutane which included gross haematuria, cognitive decline, muscular weakness, retinoid skin rash and development of a major depressive disorder were not detected and/or acted on in a timely manner
- 2) The drug Roaccutane was not considered as a causative factor in Julian's depression
- 3) Roaccutane is overprescribed and there is not adequate recognition of the contribution of the drug to depression, suicide ideation and completion.
- 4) Because Julian presented as "rational", he was not taken seriously, despite having told his GP, psychologist and dermatologist that he was suicidal. He was not admitted for immediate assessment of his depression; he did not receive adequate monitoring or treatment. After the event, all practitioners denied responsibility for Julian's management

- 5) There appears to have been inadequate communication between his GP, psychologist and dermatologist in circumstances where he had told each of them that he had become suicidal

The emotional and financial toll on our family has been extreme. Julian's father committed suicide on the first anniversary of Julian's death because of the devastation Julian's suicide caused.

My daughter and I have attempted to raise awareness of the effect of this medication on mental health by participating in the following activities:

- 1) Interview with "The Australian" newspaper on suicide, 26-27<sup>th</sup> February 2011 (see <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/its-time-to-talk/story-e6fmg8h6-1226010786783>) – Philippa Cocciolone
- 2) Interview with the Channel 7 "Sunday" program on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Catherine and Philippa Cocciolone (see <https://au.news.yahoo.com/sunday-night/features/a/18498850/dying-for-better-skin/>)
- 3) Letter to the South Australian Minister for Health The Hon John Hill (attached)- Catherine Cocciolone
- 4) Radio interview with Hack (Triple J) on the effects of medical treatments on acne written by Julian Morgans- Philippa Cocciolone

We would be happy to provide further information or be available for interview.

Yours sincerely,

Catherine and Philippa Cocciolone