

1<sup>st</sup> July 2008

Ms. P.

Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth  
PO Box 6021  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

**Submission -Inquiry into better support for carers by Paola Mason**

**“Mrs. .... is as well as she is because of the level of care she has received from her daughters” my mum’s GP stated to solicitors when it was advised that we gain Power of Attorney.**

I am a carer of a parent with a mental illness. My parent became unwell (she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and manic depression) when I was 6 years old, I am now almost 49 years of age. I have felt the full brunt of the stigma attached to mental illness. I have also been exposed to the discrimination of coming from a non-English speaking background. I hold no animosity towards people or a system that has historically been unkind to the mentally ill and their families. The purpose of this submission is to advance mental health for the consumers, carers and the children/young people. I also would like to think that this submission will contribute towards good mental health practice for Australia.

1. the role and contribution of carers in society and how this should be recognised

The role and contribution of carers in society has begun to be recognised. The information is readily available through Carer’s Australia and facts and figures will continue to increase within the Australian Bureau of Statistics as the ‘Right Questions’ (Who is your Primary Carer? Do you have dependent children?) Start to be asked.

2. the barriers to social and economic participation for carers, with a particular focus on helping carers to find and/or retain employment;

I have in my lifetime I have undertaken numerous jobs, this has had its benefits and pitfalls. It has been challenging because I would find that I would leave a job because I couldn’t manage my caring and employment obligations at the same time. I have often been titled with the term “Jill of all Trades”; this is because I have had to do what I have to do. This has also meant that I have not necessarily achieved the relevant qualifications for certain positions. In my working life I have found very few

employers who can afford to employ individuals who may not be reliable at times and secondly really understand the time, energy and mental health involved in caring issues.

I have qualified for the carer's pension on two occasions. The first being when I left work to nurse my father who was dying from cancer and the second a short time before my mother entered an aged care facility due to ageing issues. I was informed of the carer's pension to look after my father in 1985, it was a complex process and when answering the questions I observed that these questions do not apply at all to someone looking after a loved one with mental illness so never pursued it further whilst looking after mum.

The challenges involved with caring for someone with a psychiatric disability are complex and not at all covered well in any of the Centrelink assessments and therefore we carers must manage around a system that doesn't acknowledge us and ultimately doesn't support us. As Carers it is difficult to ask for help and when your role isn't even acknowledged, it feels like there is not purpose to asking because "we don't matter".

Taking all of this into consideration, I have never personally been "cash flow wealthy" and I have had to learn to manage my limited cash flow whilst also managing my parent's finances. We are also fortunate that we have each other.

3. the practical measures required to better support carers, including key priorities for action; and

I feel that the most positive practical measure to support carers is to **Identify (acknowledge) them / help them identify themselves?** We do exist! This is whether we are young or old. Our roles may vary but are none the less important. In my case it would have been so helpful, I may have been able to apply for Centrelink payments when necessary to help me in my caring role instead of having to find employment when I just couldn't cope with it all (the pressure was huge during these times and I would go to the GP quite depressed because I felt torn between my caring and daughterly obligation, and being a "bludger").

Another practical measure would be that I were given some kind of **Care plan and educational information** when mum left the hospital or from the psychiatrist to help support me when I would bring mum home. It would have also been nice to have someone for me to talk to **Counselling/Guidance.** There were many a time when having to work through a system that wasn't supportive to me, that a **Carer Advocate** would have been helpful.

Nowadays it would be helpful to have all relevant information in one place. I have to carry my parent's Concession Card, Ambulance Card, Diabetes Card etc, the Power of Attorney and Enduring Guardianship papers, paperwork identifying a 100 point check for my mum, 100 point check for me and the

list goes on. If there was a **Carer's card** it could perhaps have all of this information on it?

4. strategies to assist carers to access the same range of opportunities and choices as the wider community, including strategies to increase the capacity for carers to make choices within their caring roles, transition into and out of caring, and effectively plan for the future.

There needs to be a **consistent point of identification** of the role and this could be done **nationally**.

**Employers/Businesses need to be more understanding and flexible** where possible. This applies to both the private and public sector.

The **Centrelink assessment for carers needs to also be more flexible**. It is really challenging working and caring (many carers have left full-time employment/education to undertake their role).

**Education** at many levels (about the illness, looking after yourself, grief and loss etc) needs to be accessible be ongoing.

**Respite** is necessary because there are times that the role is overwhelming and can take its toll not only on one's health but also mental health.

As mentioned previously, **perhaps a Carer's Card** could be helpful.

I hope that this information is helpful. I would like to believe that we in Australia care about our Carers and most importantly, that through this parliamentary inquiry carers whether young or older may be better understood and supported in their role.

Yours sincerely

Paola