

Submission to:

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment,
Education and Workplace, Relations.

Re:

"Issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or
establishing a business, following -unemployment".

From: Mary T. Archibald.

Dated: 31 March 1999.

4 Lansell Road
Glen Waverley, Vic., 3150

31 March 1999

The Secretary
House of Representatives Standing
Committee on Employment, Education and
Workplace Relations
Suite RI 116 Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600.

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: Issues specific to workers over 45 years of age seeking employment, or establishing a business,
following unemployment.**

I wish to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations on the above matter that was advertised in the Weekend Australian Newspaper on 20-21 March 1999.

Let me outline my story.

I was formerly the Chief Executive Officer and Director of Nursing of Burwood & District Community Hospital, which was one of the most cost effective and efficient public hospitals in this State. This dual appointment gave me an unprecedented opportunity to forge a new direction for the hospital. Within an environment of government-led reform initiatives, I consistently maintained service excellence and found ways to enhance resources in a creative and flexible manner. This was matched with sustained levels of innovation, productivity and cost effectiveness. During my period of tenure, the power of vision, teamwork, quality values and stewardship enabled the achievement of significant accomplishments, including Australian awards for innovative health care services. My own personal dedication and commitment to healthcare in this Country culminated in an Australia Day Honour 1997.

Following the closure of Burwood Hospital in December 1996, due to Government rationalisation of health services, my position became redundant and I was kept in a hiatus for a year. I tried actively to seek employment through the Inner and Eastern Healthcare Network, but no job became available. I was terminated from the Network on 29th November 1997.

Since then the same situation has continued, even though I am highly trained and qualified for the work that I did. I have pursued Career and Outplacement Counselling, as well as Job Search strategies and have been informed, that 75 to 80% of the job market is "hidden", ie it is not advertised.

Furthermore, there appears to be discrimination by potential employers on the grounds of **age, maturity and gender**, even though there are Acts in this Country against such discrimination. I have applied for **32 jobs in the last 16 mouths** and have been called for **interview on one occasion only**.

I have had a very successful career path with a breadth of knowledge and diverse experience in the healthcare industry, which has spanned the past 35 years. After so many years of genuine commitment to making a real difference to the lives of so many people, I find my present status of unemployment frustrating, soul destroying and unbelievable.

My dream and vision is that we have a more equitable and truly representative Executive workforce in this country. I know that Australia needs its best minds as we face the new millenium. I can only hope that my knowledge, skills and creativity can be used to make a significant contribution in the years ahead.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with the House of Representatives Standing Committee to discuss my experience in greater depth. I enclose for your interest:

- My Story entitled, "I Just Want To Leave My Footprints On This Life"
- My Curriculum Vitae
- Some letters of commendation
- Recent correspondence

and ask you to reflect upon why I am unemployed in this country?

Yours sincerely,

Mary T. Archibald. Churchill Fellow PSM

I Just want to leave my footprints on this life.

My Story.

I JUST WANT TO LEAVE MY FOOTPRINTS ON THIS LIFE.

At 6pm on Tuesday December 3rd 1996 my life changed forever. My life's work of the past 11 years was cut out. Not with the precision of a surgical knife, to which i was so accustomed. But rather with the aggression of a sledge- hammer --- concise, brutal and damaging.

Standing in the street at the back of the hospital flanked by a security guard and two loyal members of my staff, I felt stripped of my life's work ----- My pursuit of excellence in patient care was over--- The Board Room empty ----- The patients gone! Burwood and District Community Hospital had closed its doors for the last time.

A member of my staff drove me home.

As I climbed up into her Tarago Van, with a few of my personal possessions, I could not help but feel her warmth and concern. It was explosive yet all very familiar and so much a part of the loving care and compassion that penetrated every fibre of the being of Burwood Hospital.

“Will you be alright?” she tentatively asked. “Yes”, “I’ll call you”. She was gone.

I can remember walking into my home that day, the words of dismissal stinging in my brain. I wanted to cry out, but who would hear me. I was overwhelmed by the silence. I was alone. I felt abandoned. How could I deal with this? I began to recount in my mind what had happened. I had lived a whole lifetime in just one day!

At 2.20pm on 3rd December 1996 I was given my deliverance ----“you are to leave by end of business today” the messenger said. My first reaction was one of disbelief. How could my colleague do this to me? -----You know Mary we don't like doing these things, he insisted. His discomfort was obvious. His fixed stare all too telling. His manner ----awkward and cold.

I protested in an attempt to bring some sort of rationality to this horrendous situation. “In a true sense” I can recall saying, “there is no business going on, we are merely disposing of assets”. What an irony after 11 years as Leader of this “Centre of Excellence” ----- I too was being disposed of!

When I gathered my senses, I ran to tell the few remaining staff members who were helping with the closure. They were stunned, their immediate reaction one of disbelief What had I done wrong they asked. The maintenance men downed tools refusing to work for people who would treat 'Mary" in this way. Other staff gathered in my office. Their silence and distraught faces told a million stories. I phoned Simon, CEO of the Healthcare Network, as this I believed was my direct reporting relationship. I questioned whether the messenger was given delegated authority to ask me to leave. The response was that as CEO I should fix up my own local disputes. I handed the phone to a member of my staff who too questioned the decision, I believe he was given the same response.

Thoughts of self-doubt flooded into my brain. What had I done wrong? Why was I being treated in this way?

At 6pm that day I did what I was told to do and left.

At 8.20pm my thoughts were broken by the sounds of the phone ringing, it was a member of the Network staff “How are you feeling?” he asked. Look you didn't tell us the staff was having de-briefing counseling. Look we're more than happy for you to come back tomorrow then have two days off to rest before you meet with Simon on Friday. This conversation led to more confusion. I had been asked to leave, yet I was being asked to return the next day. If I didn't return I could be seen as a recalcitrant employee.

I did return the next day and on Friday donned my best suit and met with Simon. Despite an apparent lightheartedness to the meeting, the message was clear. There were no CEO jobs in the Network. So it was agreed that I should take 8 weeks Annual Leave and have a rest! I was offered Career Counselling. It didn't strike me as strange that I should obey and pursue this as an opportunity during my period of leave. On reflection, I went along with this arrangement as I trusted and believed that the Network had my own best interests at heart. The meeting ended with an agreement that we would be in contact during January.

The silence was broken late January 1997 with a phone call from the Network. The Press was trying to contact me, it was something about an Australia Day Honour. My reply indicated that it was confidential and that I could not elaborate. For the first time in all that happened, prior to and subsequently, I felt a sense of power.

Some days later it was announced that I had won a Public Service Medal for developing a new model of care for Kidney Failure patients in this State. What an irony that this "Centre of Excellence" which was caught up in the rationalization of Public health services, was now closed. The ideas, dreams, commitment and dedication that had been built up and created over those 11 years was now decimated.

Suddenly, a 6months Project Management position with the Network was offered and followed by 3 months Re-Deployment. I was advised to market myself to the 13 CEO's in this \$700 million Healthcare Network. My job search met with a wall of silence. I was thanked for my professionalism and terminated on 28th November 1997.

The next few months were taken up with a myriad of appointments ----- Career and Old Placement Counseling, Job Search strategies and Networking. The business of these activities left my "soul" parched and dry. I was telling the same story over and over, it became like a mantra ----- Burwood was one of the most cost effective and efficient public hospitals in this State". "Within an environment of Government-led reform initiatives, I have consistently maintained service excellence and found ways to enhance resources in a creative and flexible manner". "This was matched with sustained levels of innovation, productivity and cost effectiveness". "During my period of tenure, the power of vision, teamwork, quality values and stewardship enabled the achievement of significant accomplishments, including Australian awards for innovative healthcare services". "We treated 23,000 patients in my 11 years, with not one case of medico-legal litigation, not one Coroner's case." "I have a Winston Churchill Fellowship." "I have an MBA." These, I believed were powerful indicators of quality and business acumen. According to the Hippocratic Oath, we did no harm. We pursued excellence! These lofty aspirations would surely find me a job! But alas, it did not happen.

I came to understand that my **job search strategy was filled with paradox**, full of traps for the uninitiated! Keep yourself in circulation we are advised Network Apply for jobs Target your employer Scope and carefully word your resume. Don't limit yourself. Sell yourself!

The Energy!----- **32 Job applications later my patience was wearing thin**. Potential employers are full of powerful demands. Do you have ---"Daring, Vision, Innovation, Creativity?"--- "Professional and commercial excellence". Are you "strong, proactive and positive" "a change agent", "multi-skilled, flexible adaptable" etc --- -- I was all of these things and more. So I applied. The inconceivable happened. Out of this realm of possibilities I was **called for interview on one occasion only**. Rejected sight unseen, I sought answers. Was my resume too long? My letter of application targeted inappropriately? Did I match the selection criteria? My quest for answers met with a mixed response. Some feedback was too generic to be helpful, others encouraged me to try again the next time and the worst of all sins-no response to my calls or letters of application. **Why was this high achiever not called?**

Others advised in more cryptic terms that I was **just "too old"**. My protest in the corridors of power met with the suggestion that **I should retire**. Yet another, that I consider doing **voluntary work**. The reaction of my colleagues was deafening in its silence. Did I represent the persona of Executive unemployment in the healthcare industry? Who would be next?

I learnt an important lesson. I was being treated with apparent lightheartedness and indifference. I felt like "Camus -The Outsider". My self esteem at its lowest ebb.

Certainly I had rattled the "Cage" and challenged convention many times. Maybe, just maybe, I had ruffled too many feathers! To be innovative and creative means to live life on the edge. Your inspiration is to create anew. The mainstream is for others!

My work had meaning in my life. It wasn't just a job. It was a passion! Over the past 36 years in healthcare I wanted to make a real difference to peoples lives. I know that I achieved that and more. I was healer, artist, leader, manager and choreographer in the dance of life. I was a health care professional who would not

compromise excellence. The patient was the centre of my universe! The texture of my professional life-rich and rewarding.

The ISOLATION ----- from people ----- the rituals of daily work ----- decisions -----leadership ----- and my profession was profound and soul destroying.

I had become one of the "silent unemployed", uncounted and unseen! No pension, no ability to access superannuation, and diminished cash flow. I was eroding my asset base just to live. I was unemployable at the mature age of 54 years! In days gone by this was considered to be your peak years, now these years were filled with disillusionment and doubt. My life was a treadmill. Attempts to get a job and keep busy were my daily goals. At times any job would do just to enhance my self-esteem and self worth. Any job would also prove to me that I was worthwhile and could continue to use my professional name”Miss Archibald”.

I was staring into an abyss, there was a deep void in my life.

THE TURNING POINT ----- RESILIENCE in ADVERSITY. It was at this time that I found myself committed to a bold act ----- . I would tell my story. To remain silent would be to sink into the worst of sins --- indifference! As the poet, Elie Wiesel puts it ---"what is at stake is your life, your survival! Do not forget, do not forget!" (Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire).

I became excited by the notion of being a “Pilgrim”. With courage and conviction I would now alter my sights on the journey, which would be as important as the destination. For I had begun to know and understand that there are many more mature age travellers on my journey. They too have been struck off in the prime of their working lives.

My belief and hope is that there is a place on the road for all of us --- those mature aged unemployed men and women who share my idealism, spirit of adventure and spiritedness. Fellow dreamers who want to continue to contribute and who want also to believe in a more equitable and truly representative workforce in this country. For what is at stake is a diminishing of our meaning and purpose in life. But more importantly, is a loss to the community of the richness, variety, texture, loyalty and wisdom of our collective human experience.

We need urgently to reflect with real compassion. And hope that in a world that is flirting with the extinction of all humanness, of all humanity that we do not continue to follow the same path. For inequality in employment is politically, socially and economically unacceptable. This will need leadership to be recognized. The public needs leadership. But who will be inspired by my dream? Who will focus a nation? Who will be my voice?

For my part--- **I just want to leave my footprints on this life!**