

20 November 2009

Re Senate committee inquiry into suicide

Dear Senators,

On March 1st 2006 my 36 year old son Jack Alexander Tilley committed suicide at the home he lived in. Jack had been a sufferer of occasional depression for several years. I believe he was also bipolar but that was never diagnosed officially because he had not been attended to by a psychiatrist. I believe psychiatrists are few and far between in Tasmania so a local GP was prescribing anti depressive medication for Jack.

Jack had had previous bouts of depression and on one occasion, to my knowledge, he had taken a large number of his anti depressive pills and been hospitalised in Hobart, but had received very little attention after that event. This was probably because he soon recovered and felt he could cope. In fact had felt very well again, sufficient return to his work at sea as a deck officer, for which he was trained at the Maritime College Launceston.

The first time my wife and I were aware of his tendency to feeling depressed was back in the early 1990s when he was discharged from his ship in Botany Bay and at that time my wife and I had collected him and taken him to a private Psychiatric hospital in Kogarah Sydney but within a few hours he discharged himself to be looked after by his girl friend and her family who took him back to Devonport, much to our and the doctor's [psychiatrist's] concern.

To my wife this was a very foolish move on my son's part but it was his and their choice. We were concerned because we felt the doctor who was to attend to him in Kogarah was well known to us, my wife also being a sufferer of bipolar disorder having had several episodes of depression and the mania, common to Bipolar sufferers.

The 4 main points I wish to make are as follows.

1. The apparent lack of good psychiatric care and support in Hobart in particular at the time this happened, and in Tasmania generally,
2. The lack of a full and proper diagnosis of what we believe and my wife's own psychiatrist knew of Jack's probable bipolar condition, probably because GPs under whom he was treated knew little of either his full condition or of his mother's history. I would guess he only saw the GP when he was depressed.
3. The failure of the Hobart Hospital to recognise the full extent of my son's desperation when he, on my phoned advise, went to see the Hobart hospital staff just 2 days before he took his life. [remember the had been treated there for over-dosing some years before]. He was told by the staff at the Hobart hospital there wasn't a psychiatrist available who could see him for about 4 months, the resident psychiatrist was away, I think I was told, "on holiday". So there was no apparent properly qualified back up.
4. The fact that a Hobart Solicitor, because of the interfering and stupid Privacy Act, was unable to alert me to my son's suspect suicidal condition when some 3 years prior he signed a will which on me subsequent reviewing after his death it was obvious that he was considering the possibility of suicide at some time in the not too distant future. I will if you wish provide you with a copy of the will. When I spoke with the solicitor a few weeks after my son's death he was very embarrassed and apologetic for he confided with me words to the effect ' When the will was being prepared I was fearing this conversation some time in the future '.

My son was just 36, He had the maritime world ahead of him, a good well paid job and good prospects. He had just completed his first senior role as first officer on a huge LNG carrier travelling between Das Island Gas terminal Dubai and Japan. He was very talented as many bipolar sufferers are, but I believe with correct diagnosis and appropriate medication he would have been alive now.

His mother is a chronic bipolar sufferer but at 63 she is still alive, perhaps because for her there has been excellent treatment and help. This she gets from those around her. My son did have a loving partner with whom he lived, but I did feel that they sometimes got among some wrong types because they did smoke marijuana occasionally and I believe that this drug does exacerbate some mental illness conditions. However one couldn't talk about this to him, it would have been seen as interfering.

I hope this information's from us is of some use to you in your inquiry and I am prepared to attend a meeting to provide more information if you think it would be useful or maybe to talk to you on the phone.

Some good did arise as a result of this unfortunate event. I believe 4-5 people received his organs; kidneys, liver, pancreas, heart and lungs. Perhaps we can take some solace in that, for he was a very thoughtful and caring son.

Kind regards
James Tilley