

18th April 2005

Attention Senator Lyn Allison,
Chair of Senate Select Committee.

Re Submission to the National Mental Health Strategy.

As a father of a son who has suffer schizophrenia for about fifteen years and having experienced some psychotic and suicidal events I wish to make the following comments. Most things have changed considerably in the past hundred years, then the mentally ill were treated by locking them away and pretended they do not exist even by family members and communities.

Now, the treatments and drugs available have improved dramatically.

However, in my view much more needs to be done and can be done.

We all need to accept the fact, that one in five people will endure a mental illness in their lifetime – This is a lot of people and may be a loved one and/or child.

Like road accidents no one want to know until it happens to me or my family.

COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Until the whole community especially politicians and police is made aware, educated and adequately informed in where to get help and what to do to deal with mentally illness presentations our loved ones will continue to fall through the increasing gaps in our frustrated and stretched mental health and services systems. The psychotic events now occur in the community therefore; the community needs to know the availability of crisis assessment people and their responsibilities and the role police play when needed.

TRAINING

In my experience too much is left to the police to deal with especially when I understand that the Victorian police only receive 220 minutes of training in mental illness in their 20 week training program. In cities, I believe a special crisis teams needs to be trained and employed to deal with these events. (Not trained to say call the police which currently happens).

In country and smaller communities police need to be specially trained to cope with these situations. The current police training shows an obsession with achieving a conviction of the mentally ill person without any consideration for their wellbeing. My son's case (commencing 2001) resulted in many court appearances over a two-year period until a guilty verdict was agreed and the police were then satisfied with an unrecorded conviction. A huge waste of taxpayer's money, which could have better spent on mental health.

STATE HOSPITALS

In my experience hospitals have handled physical health problems such as attempted suicide very well. However, for mental health problems they do not seem to employ experienced staff to do the job adequately. On two occasions it has been necessary to resort to blackmail to get my son admitted to hospital following psychotic events. It is obvious to most people that the hospital /mental health is in need of a complete overhaul Australia wide to remove the politics, and provide a fairer service to those who need it. I believe until the federal hospital/mental health system is upgraded and made uniform across the states your tasks will be greatly compromised.

PRIVACY ACT

These days the privacy act is very thorough in protecting the rights of professionals and the healthy person but at the expense of the mentally ill.

However, I believe something needs to be done to responsibly help the mental ill in time of need. At a time when my son was being treated after a psychotic episode I endeavoured to complain of hospital treatment to the appropriate Victorian government department.

However, the complaint was not accepted because my son was of adult age - PRIVACY ACT.

My son was released from hospital four hours after a major psychotic episode. Fortunately, I was able to convince the Sergeant in charge that had I picked up my son from his police station that night he would be responsible for my health should anything occur. Twenty minutes later the sergeant phoned to advise me my son was being admitted to hospital. He would not tell me how he managed this action. Needless to say, I have a very high regard for the Victorian police. My son was released six weeks later after his medication was stabilised.

Good luck with your Senate Select Committee on Mental Health, and truly hope you can recommend some changes to improve the systems and lessen the gaps for the mentally ill, their families, and the wider community.

Yours Sincerely