

27<sup>th</sup> April 2005

Committee Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on Mental Health  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is my contribution to the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health. I am writing this letter directly from my experiences as a *family member of someone with Schizophrenia* and a *person who has experienced Depression*.

In this letter I would like to address:

**Family Education and Support:**

Senate Inquiry Terms of Reference 1 (e), (f), (g), (l)

My brother's first major psychosis was highly traumatic for our family, not least of all my brother who is generally considered an intelligent, kind and loving person. The prolonged fear, uncertainty and general feelings of helplessness that I experienced during his psychosis were the triggers for my first episode of clinical depression.

Later as my brother was recovering, my own condition was worsening and one of my most severe symptoms was hundreds of brutal scenarios to my own person, which were replayed continually and uncontrollably through my mind.

These were a form of mental punishment originating from the feelings of unresolved grief and guilt about my brother and his illness. Later their purpose changed, they were mental punishment for my inability to function in the work place and maintain relationships, which ironically were a result of my depression. The depression disabled me and in doing so set up a cyclic and destructive pattern that took a great deal of effort to break.

After 12 months in an untreated depressive state, I had largely wrestled back control of my conscious thoughts. However at that time I decided to seek assistance from a psychologist for lingering symptoms of depression. During the subsequent 12 months I used a combination of visits to the psychologist and antidepressants to recover fully from the depressive episode.

I estimate my personal outlays during recovery were several thousand dollars. The cost to my employer due to lost work productivity would be many times this amount again. The toll on my personal relationships cannot be quantified.

This is just a short account of part of my experience as a family member of someone with schizophrenia. I have had another episode of reactive depression to another of my brother's psychoses which I will forgo explaining. I also have five other members in my family (not including my brother) whose personal trauma and emotional reactions to my brother's illness are not something I can explain appropriately.

Having a person with mental illness in the family places incredible pressure on the family unit and individual members. It can break down other family relationships and I can well understand how divorce would be a frequent result though I am happy to say my parents are still married. Clearly from my experience it can be seen that other members of the family are likely to suffer debilitating illnesses themselves when trying to cope without appropriate support.

Having come full circle through my own journey with depression I approached the Mental Illness Fellowship in the city in which I live with the intention of becoming a volunteer. I wanted to give what assistance I could to people living through similar difficulties. It was my first contact with the Fellowship and a linkage that evolved into an incredibly significant support network for our family.

At the suggestion of Fellowship staff, my Mother and I attended the Fellowship's Wellways educational program for families, which was our first source of complete, valid and useful information. We were educated about the bio-psycho-social model, various illnesses, medications, the Mental Health Act, coping mechanisms, methods to communicate with our loved ones and many other things. The program also provided us with a unique opportunity to hear and share our experiences with other families. Our experience started to normalize and for the first time we were beginning to be informed.

The program was offered in the city where I live and since my family home is in a rural community my mother traveled a 200 km round trip once a week to participate. Our local Mental Illness Fellowship struggles on the small amount of funding they receive and this program is only offered because staff volunteer their own time. Without a significant increase in funding I can see no way that the program would ever be offered in the rural community of my family home. This is a shame because the other members of my family, and therefore my brother, would greatly benefit by attending the Wellways program.

As the primary caregiver to my brother, had my mother not attended Wellways at that particular time, I am certain our family would have disintegrated during my brother's subsequent and most recent psychosis, which came on acutely toward the end of the Wellways program. This was again a very traumatic time where family tensions were very high.

Without my mother's more complete understanding of mental illness leading up to this particular psychosis, I do not think she would have been able to cope at all since she was the target of some very aggressive and threatening behavior by my brother.

I also feel that members of our family would have largely abandoned my brother. My brother also experienced great pain and trauma during this event and he has since told us how he too contemplated running away and leaving us forever.

Needless to say I am both thankful and grateful that neither outcome eventuated.

Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go in our family's recovery from this most recent psychosis and one thing that would help enormously is some assistance with relationship building between family members. There are no formal programs and the only place I can think of to go is to the local Mental Illness Fellowship. I feel bad at the thought of taxing their already overburdened resources and I am not even sure that my mother would have the time or energy to make the trip.

In regard to rebuilding our family relationships, we really need guidance and we need prompting. We need a structure for making the effort because the recent trauma affects our ability to even bring up the subject of mental illness at all with my brother. This of course only inhibits our ability to provide care to him if he becomes unwell again in the future.

Yours Faithfully,  
Name and Address Withheld