

A once in a lifetime opportunity

The Minister for Health, the Hon. Gordon Nuttall, has offered to meet the Queensland Alliance at least twice a year to hear our perspective and discuss policy solutions to the systemic problems in the mental health system. I acknowledge the Minister's goodwill at our meeting and look forward to developing a productive relationship with him in the interests of Queenslanders affected by mental illness.

However, this relationship is in its infancy and the Alliance perspective and policy solutions clearly remain at odds with current official policy as reflected in the Budget. While there was a moderate increase in mental health funding, no additional funding was provided to the non-government sector. The increased allocation shows a continued reliance on public sector service delivery models and their focus on tertiary level symptom management.

Opportunities for positive and significant systemic changes are rare; however, current inquiries and the release of key reports provide a strategic opportunity for reform. The primary concern of the Morris Inquiry is medical standards in our hospitals but Peter Forster is addressing wider 'culture' and performance concerns in his review of public health administration in Queensland. Issues related to mental health administration will therefore be an important focus of the Forster review.

A report on the combined Mental Health Council of Australia and Human Rights and Equal Opportu-

nities Commission's community consultations is due to be released in July. The Palmer Inquiry will shortly report to the Federal Minister for Immigration in relation to the detention of Cornelia Rau. The Senate Inquiry's report into mental health is due in October.

In addition to his submission to the Senate Inquiry, Queensland's Public Advocate, Ian Boardman, provided a confidential and more critical submission to the Health Minister. The submission claims that entrenched systemic problems in Queensland Health and in its organisational culture have impacted on vulnerable people with mental illness. We congratulate Mr Nuttall for making this paper public and as a contribution to the public policy debate.

In highlighting the need to focus on and implement a Recovery Framework, the Public Advocate is concerned the current approach in community service delivery is dominated by the biomedical model. He further observes that -

.....non-clinical psychosocial rehabilitative services, delivered by the non-government sector, are widely recognised as the key to assisting people's journey of recovery from a mental illness, of preventing the onset of a debilitating psychiatric disability and of reducing the need for inpatient admission.

As the daily drama of the Morris inquiry is played out, we are witnessing an unseemly battle between powerful health groups



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as they manoeuvre to ensure their professionally based interests are served. The public interest and good health policy can get lost in this battle for hegemony. The community sector is a small voice in this drama and it is reassuring to have a non-partisan government official identify with such clarity and without vested interest some important systemic issues and policy solutions in the interests of people with a mental illness.

I was delighted to hear the Premier, The Hon. Peter Beattie, at a Budget breakfast speak openly and forthrightly about the issues and needs of people with a mental illness in the context of wider health reform. He said that if the Government is not getting the mental health policy settings right he wanted to hear from people who have a contribution to make - not just the dominant voices heard on the nightly news. I encourage all our members to make sure our sector's voice is heard during what the Premier referred to as "a once in a lifetime opportunity".