

Senate Enquiry
The Senate Enquiry into Mental Health issues
Parliament House
Canberra
The Senate Enquiry into the current Mental Health System,



Dear Sirs,

Following some comment made in the "7.30 Report", on the ABC recently, concerning carers, and the system, I would like to submit the following comment, after some twenty years experience of this system.

Some 18 months ago, in the "show and tell" segment of the Andrew Denton show, a brave lady of later years highlighted the difficulties she had faced in caring, as a sole carer, for a forty something son, who unfortunately, like to lay down in front of trains to cut off his limbs.

The whole point of her appearance in this venue, with her son, was to make the point, and I quote her: "Deinstitutionalisation is a social experiment that has failed" – to which anyone with a close experience of the matter will add a hearty "hear, hear".

That unlovely Latinate euphemism, was the brain child of a drunk (pardon me) named Bob Hawke – as anyone with an experience of drunks knows, they always have the "final solution" to the problems of everything – this was Bob's "final solution" to the problems of the mentally ill – of course.

By which I mean, of course it wasn't anything of the kind – it was a very ill considered and farcical notion in the form it was implemented in, ensuring that a burden that never belonged was shifted squarely onto the backs of family and relatives; it has caused enormous hardship, and suffering in the lives of all concerned, and has added not one whit to the original plight of the people it was intended to help.

"Deinstitutionalisation" is one of those obfuscating Latinate euphemisms, like "defenestration" – that was when the KGB used to interview clients by throwing them through the window of a second story building – the mentally ill may not have hit the pavement quite so hard, but it was, for the majority of them, very devastating, – so many have died in abject misery, poverty and hardship, exposed to victimisation by everyone so inclined, and there have been no shortage of takers there.

(I should explain here, that I have been the sole carer for a son who was diagnosed with Schizophrenia at the age of eighteen; he is now forty two)

Following the legislation, in the case of my son, the inmates of the Richmond clinic, in Lismore, NSW, were transferred to a rural slum boarding house, called "Bowview Lodge" at Kyogle, well out in the bush. This inspiring institution was run by a Ukrainian, with some English, whose job it was also to administer to the medication routines of the "guests" – the "consulting psychiatrist" would motor over once a fortnight in his landrover, collect forty or so signatures on Medicare blanks from his lined queue of patients, then scoot back to Lismore (presumably to bank the cheque).

I would regularly find my son sitting in the dark of the earthen floored basement, in a decrepit lounge chair obviously abandoned by some local dog. After three or four weekly visits, and no change in this situation, I "got around" the proprietor enough to find out what my son's medication routine was – he told me that

Rory was on 500 mgs of largactil a day. An outstanding feature of my son's particular experience of his condition, was acute catatonia- so acute, that I was on an occasion, asked by the director of psychiatric services at Wacol, in Queensland, for permission to film it for teaching purposes. Largactil is a very immobilizing medication, so that with his catatonia, it was ensured that he would remain rooted to the spot - which he apparently did, week in and week out. Finally, I rang the psychiatrist for an explanation- he gave me some spiel, about the condition being "all downhill" and the rest of it- I told him, I wasn't really interested in his medical fortune telling, I was far more interested in someone practicing some competent medicine, and that if he didn't do something about my son's medication program, I was going to report him to the Dept. of Health for the medical abuse of a patient.- at the mention of which, I in fact, got a very co-operative medical person.

While the recipients of this astonishing ^{and} life changing piece of social engineering, were enjoying the benefits of their new freedoms, in bottom of the heap destitute accommodation all over the nation, the doctors and nurses at the Richmond Clinic, anyway, got the benefits of a 13 million dollar facelift- new tea rooms and conference rooms- new patients quarters- and, best of all, almost not a mentally ill person in sight- so everyone was able to concentrate on their clipboards, and practice- just in case a patient ever actually got in.

As for myself, I have had the privilege of having to abandon my job as a teacher, because there was simply no other way, to cope with the outcomes presented to relatives by this lunatic legislation. I was a very good teacher of maths and science, and, what is more, enjoyed doing it very much- all my education and experience has been lost to both myself, and the community, and my role as carer has ensured that I enjoy an old age of certain poverty- no superannuation for me!

Yes, I do feel - very resentful! Because, MENTAL ILLNESS IS NOT, AND NEVER HAS BEEN, A FAMILY RESPONSIBILITY. If you want a society, a nation must reproduce- and reproduction is NOT a perfect process- six percent of the population will arrive on the planet with a quite disabling genetic disability- not their fault- just the throw of the genetic dice, as Professor Watson remarked, in the recent program on DNA on the ABC. If society wants the upside, the 94 percent who lead happy and productive lives, then it has to "cop" the downside- and accept responsibility for the care and well being of those six percent of us, who, no fault of their own, have to face very difficult, and often, very unhappy existences.

ALL correspondence, in the letters during each Mental Health week, in the dailies across the nation(usually following the mandatory banner headlines of how society is failing the mentally ill, mea culpa, mea culpa) make the same eternal request- for, as the very first step in attempting to mend this catastrophically flawed system, the provision of PURPOSE BUILT ACCOMODATION. I believe something like 25 billion dollars has been saved to the public purse, and gone into general revenue, since the introduction of deinstitutionalisation. Whatever the amount, the fact remains, this is money stolen from the mentally ill(the last Queensland budget for example, contained an item of 15 million dollars for an expenditure on the Grand Prix- and not a single red cent for mental health - of course(above normal allocations)

I have detailed a small(very small) part, of my life as a carer, in this u;nfort;unate system- of the constant battles with the medical profession in problems arising out of the nonsensical provisions of patient confidentiality,for example, I am leaving unstated.NO ONE should be asked to take on, the unrelenting stress of the carer's role, in the case of mental illness.Unlike the situation, with a physical illness to cope with for a relative, th;ere is no end of the day when you are finished- it is u;nrelenting , seven days a week, every day of the year- it never stops , and it never lets up. My rewards for my years in this role(apart from th;e significant poverty; it has brought) are chronic asmthma, cancer, high blood pressure and chronic arthritis- all stress diseases.None of my brothers , or sister, with the same family constitution as mine, have these diseases.

I:n conclusion, I would remark that every forecast of the Burgess report, when the Commissioner for Human Rights ;brought down his finding s some decade or so ago, have been unhappily met- nine out of every ten dollars spent on th;e mentally ill , do , in fact, spiral up into the pockets of the " mentally well" , as he had predicted , with very prosperous career paths(and lots of holidays of course, in such a stressful job) - meanwh;ile, life rolls on for th;e " beneficiaries" of all this expensive education- one th;ing is completely certain, no one is going to spend any money on the mentally ill themselves, to help th;em find the best in th;eir lives, are th;ey.

Yours faithfully

NSW

A large, solid black rectangular redaction covers the signature area, obscuring the name and any handwritten notes.