

As the mother of a young man with a diagnosed mental illness for the last 10 years, but also a professional counsellor, I feel that I am in a prime position to comment on the state of mental health services in our community.

The issues I would like to raise are the following:

THE DIFFICULTY IN GETTING HOSPITAL ADMISSION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE PATIENT AND THEIR FAMILY

Several years ago now, my son was clearly psychotic. He had not connected with the mental health system at this stage and we tried to prepare him as much as possible for the hospital visit and stay, saying that he would be safe and treated with respect and dignity. He was terrified. We took him to the hospital 3 times, each time being turned away with him being given valium or serepax. At this stage reasons given were that he was under the effects of marijuana (a well known source of self medication for mental health patients) or that he was suffering withdrawal (because he had stopped using to get help).

Finally it was realised how sick he was (and after he had caused damage to the house through fires, and punching walls and windows etc) and we were told to bring him to the hospital. The trauma associated with this visit has affected all of us, and after several years the memory continues to haunt. He was greeted by staff and police and thrown to ground after punching a wall. His pants were pulled down in the ensuing tussle, and despite pleas to pull them up, he was left in that state. Being an asthmatic, he was also finding it difficult to breathe, but staff only shouted back at him when he asked them to take the pressure off his chest. He was sedated and taken to a hospital in Newcastle where he remained for a week, until pressure on the beds from local patients required that he be sent back to Port Macquarie. He was left terrified of the hospital system, and lacked any respect for the staff and police. I suggest that he has suffered PTSD as a consequence of the brutality of this botched admission by the hospital.

The difficulty of getting a patient to hospital is usually a nightmare for the carers. In our area, our only option was to call the police if he wouldn't go voluntarily. On speaking with a policewoman after the event, she was telling me that the police feel the need for a mental health worker to go with them to collect patients as the police feel inadequate to handle people who are sick. Examples of this abound in which people with mental health problems are killed or injured and traumatized by police who are called out to deal with them. How many other patients would suffer PTSD as a result of the experience! The hospital is not resourced to provide a mental health worker to go with police to collect patients.

A further visit to hospital with him in a manic state a couple of years later resulted in a four hour wait until he was finally admitted. It seems the norm that public patients are required to wait patiently for several hours before being admitted. A patient with mental health problems is in no condition to wait that period of time without losing dignity or becoming unmanageable in the process.

Recent upgrades to our local mental health service at Port Macquarie, were meant to address this problem. Late in 2005 we again took our son to hospital after already having had an assessment through the new mental health access line, and after a 4 1/2 hour wait, we were

told there were no beds and that we would have to go to another hospital which was 11/2 hours drive away(and go through the same process again!) As none of us had slept for several days, we chose to go home rather than place ourselves at risk of a traffic accident, and continued our 24 hour vigil to keep our son safe.

- **LACK OF ACTIVITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH UNITS**

While in hospital, very little interaction seems to take place between staff and patients. No organised activities seem to take place. Patients appear to be medicated and left to watch television.

- **STAFF RESPONSIBILITY OF MENTAL HEALTH UNITS**

Last year soon after our attempts at getting our son admitted to hospital, his mental health psychologist went on extended leave without warning(my son had been seeing him for 10 years, most of the time as a private patient, but now through the mental health unit) The worker has made no attempt to contact my son, who formed a very important role in my son's life for that time.

- **COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS WORKING WITH THE MENTALLY ILL**

After several years in the wilderness my son was taking control of his life, getting his licence, attending exercise classes, having singing lessons and had established a good relationship with a personal support worker. He was ready to seek work. On their first meeting, the manager of employment services at Centacare, told him that he would **present to prospective employers as similar to someone with cerebral palsy or Down's syndrome. Many sentences were preceded with an aside to his personal support worker with "I don't know how to say this without offending him"** This one encounter led to his mental health plummeting, and led to our attempts to get him into hospital. He has since given up all activities, and refuses employment assistance fearing further humiliation. This is a young man who is recognised as a very talented musician, who was the tennis champion at his school and who was also the public speaking champion. Even though the latter two titles were in primary school, a skilled employment worker, would have discovered that he was intelligent creative and could possibly be skilled in quite a few areas. A complaint was lodged and a letter of apology received from this worker, but despite complaints to government departments no one was willing to take responsibility for psychologically abusive employee. My fear is that not many people with mental health issues are prepared to use the complaints system. My son made the comment, that without the support he had, that others would be likely to self harm or commit violent acts after such an encounter. He wonders what has happened with previous clients of this bullying and abusive worker.

- **SUMMARY**

Having spent some time advocating on my son's behalf, I am still left feeling unheard by the system. People with mental health issues are not skilled in accessing the complaints system, and I wonder how many through being abused and humiliated by the system harm themselves

or someone else through complete frustration and understandable anger. Parents of the mentally ill are trying their best to keep their young people off the streets and out of gaol, and very little assistance is given to them. Unfortunately a point must come when a family has to decide between the mental health of the rest of the family, and the person with the diagnosed mental illness. **I would imagine if mental health services were made more supportive of families, and offered more services for the mentally ill, the saving for society would far outweigh the costs.**

Apart from the inadequacy of government services, the fact that private operators are now providing community services for those with mental health issues means that there is no accountability. My son's experience of community service providers shows a lack of understanding of the needs of the mentally ill amongst the staff, and the employment of people who are emotionally abusive (as illustrated by my example of an employment officer at Centacare).