

Submission to the Family and Community Development Committee

Submission by Jennifer Howe

Inquiry into Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations

Introduction

My name is Jennifer Doreen Howe.

At the age of 15 years old I became pregnant. I met my now husband when I was 11 years old and he was 13 years of age. We have been together now for 53 years and have been married for the past 48 years. Our family consists of 5 children, 13 grandchildren, and, 2 great grandchildren.

I wish to have my case put before the Senate for the treatment I received at the age of 15 years old as outlined below.

Background

On the 27th of August 1963, at the age of 15 years old. I presented myself to the Royal Women's Hospital to confirm that I was pregnant. My pregnancy was confirmed. I returned to the Royal Women's Hospital on the 28th of September 1963 for my first appointment and was abducted from the hospital by the Catholic Welfare Family without anybody's consent, and without my permission.

The person who was responsible for my abduction was [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was the so-called Ring Leader of all the young single girls. [REDACTED] was also responsible for the "Rapid Adoptions". "Rapid Adoptions" was a scheme designed to steal the babies from single young ladies and place them with married women who had lost their babies. These women who received the stolen babies had no knowledge that they were being given somebody else's baby.

At the time I went for my appointment at the hospital, I met with [REDACTED]. During our meeting I was not allowed to have anybody else present. I now understand that this was to ensure there were no witnesses to the meeting or the events to follow.

All the young ladies involved in the "Rapid Adoptions" were treated very badly by the people involved in the scheme and we were called derogatory names such as "tramps" and "sluts", and were told we didn't deserve the babies we were carrying. The young ladies abducted were treated as "guinea pigs".

I was taken from the hospital and transported in a white van. At the time there were three other girls also in the van being taken away. When I spoke to Sister [REDACTED], she verbally confirmed that the van we were taken in belonged to St Josephs. I have a letter signed by a Sister [REDACTED] that states that she was a social worker at the hospital at the time the abduction occurred.

The Catholic Church, including [REDACTED] were then and still are aware of what happened during this period of time. The State Government was also fully aware of the "Rapid Adoption" scheme.

I may have been young when I was pregnant with my first child in 1963, this did not mean I was not capable of being a good parent and I had the complete support of my boyfriend (now husband) to have my son.

Many years later when I was carrying twins I had no choice then but to go through the Royal Women's Hospital. At the time I was approach and asked if I would like to surrender my children for adoption by other parents, as they thought I already had three children and it was too much for me to cope with and I should be supporting less fortunate families.

I have been a very good mother and raised my children to be well-respected members of our community. I have five children who are very respectable people. They are not involved with drugs or crime in any way. All of our children have good, steady employment, and, are married and have their own children.

After being abducted from the Royal Women's hospital I was "imprisoned" at the St Joseph's Babies Home in Broadmeadows. During my time at the Home I was sexually abused and held against my own will. Nobody was made aware of where I was being held at the time.

During my time at the Home, I was sexually assaulted by, a man and Nun in the Laundry Room. If I was not being held against my own will, how come when this assault occurred, I was not able to get up and leave the home?

At five and a half months pregnant I escaped from the Home.

My question is how does a young 15 year old girl present herself to the Royal Women's Hospital to have her child and be abducted without anybody being held accountable for what happened – for holding me against my will, with the intent of stealing my baby.

I have been living with the vivid recollections of all events that took place during this period and have been fighting this situation for 49 years. I have been gathering information and spoken to several people who were involved at the time including Social Workers that were involved and [REDACTED] (and I have a recording of [REDACTED] on my answering machine).

Approximately three years ago, I was able to make contact with [REDACTED]. I have a recorded message of the call as evidence that this did occur. During our very terse conversation [REDACTED] she said there were never any documents kept to make sure there was no evidence.

I questioned [REDACTED] about being transported in the van (as described earlier in this submission) and her response was where did I think they were taking me. Being so young you were taught to trust adults and do as they say. I assumed at the time that they were taking me home.

Ms [REDACTED] also stated that I was not being held against my will in the Home at the time. I again question this. How could it be that I was not being held against my own will when I had to abscond at 9:15 at night and climb the gate at 5½ months pregnant, to be able to get out as the gate that was locked.

Throughout the years since all of this occurred, I have spoken to many parliamentary members. During these conversations it has been very obvious that none of the people I have spoken to has wanted to address it. The one response I did get was completely irrelevant as it referred to me as a "forgotten Australian". This is not the case.

Reporting the Abuse

When the abduction from the hospital and the sexual assault at St Josephs Home for Babies occurred, I was unable to report the abuse. I was only able to start to talk about the events that occurred when I began seeking help from a Psychologist three years ago.

Due to the trauma and shame I felt, I was unable to talk to anyone about this. It has taken me 49 years to begin to talk about the events that took place with my Psychologist.

I did not report it to any of the organisations involved at the time, for fear that I would be found and that they would take my children from me. I was young and very scared.

Response to the Disclosure

I never disclosed the event that took place at the time to the hospital, the Home, the Church or any welfare organisations and/or people involved.

I finally reported this all to the police approximately four years ago. The police could not believe the amount of information that I had collected over the years in preparation to report this. Solicitors told me that to be able to take this case to court more evidence would be needed and this was not going to be able to be found due to the fact that nothing was ever documented in relation to the adoption scheme.

There was never an investigation of the abuse or event leading to the abuse when it occurred.

I have been able to locate five of the Social Workers who were involved with the hospital at the time, and I have met with two of them. [REDACTED] who was one of these Social Workers has been employed by the Royal Women's hospital to conduct an investigation and this was only commissioned after I had made contact with her. I feel that this was done to stop Ms [REDACTED] from talking to me or to the ABC Television who had also contacted her asking to interview her but the Royal Women's Hospital would not allow the interview to proceed.

In 1997 I applied to obtain a copy of my medical file from the Royal Women's Hospital under the Freedom of Information Act. I never received the file and upon follow-up I found out the files were sent to the old address that I lived at. The hospital then provided me with a copy of my records without the section from the Social Work Department, which was the main section that I required. They denied that they withheld this section of information from me and at the time denied even having a Social Work Department when these events took place in 1963. In 2002 I lodged an official complaint with the Royal Women's Hospital. I met with [REDACTED] (at the time the lawyer for the hospital) and [REDACTED]. Initially it was denied that the hospital even had a Social Work Department at the time and then [REDACTED] stated that it was the responsibility of the Social Work Department and the Catholic Family Welfare, at the time the abduction took place. [REDACTED] stated that I would need to locate those parties involved.

Initially no support services were offered to me and there were no positive outcomes from the meeting with the representatives from the hospital. Some time after this meeting was held, support was offered and a referral was made to my local doctor. No further support was provided from the hospital. This support lasted for two years. The Sisters of Mercy are now covering the financial cost of this for 26 sessions.

Obviously there was no support from anyone involved from the hospital or family welfare to report this matter. I had not reported it for such a long time because I did not have the courage to do so. I finally reported this to police approximately four years ago. When I arrived at the police station and

met with the Detective. I was inconsolable emotionally having to retell the story of what I had been through. The detective at the time wanted to lay criminal charges but because there was no evidence there was too much to risk. The detective then suggested looking at it from a crime scene perspective. Unfortunately it was at this time that my husband was diagnosed with prostate cancer and had to have treatment. My fight for resolution of what I had been through had to be put on hold why I supported my husband through his treatment.

To this day there has been no consequences to the perpetrators involved. Those involved in the sexual assault, the Nun and a male worker out of the laundry, have not been reprimanded in any way.

The affects from the events that took place are quite significant. Disclosing this to the police and every other person I have contacted has been traumatic on me, however I do not want to see this forgotten about and want to see some justice for the traumas I have been put through.

On Mother's Day in 2009, I informed my children of what happened to me all those years ago. Before this the children were never fully aware of what had happened but did know something had happened due to my reactions whenever there was news reported in regards to priests or the Catholic Church.

I also would never allow my children to have sleepovers at their friends houses or attend any school excursions due to the fear I had for my children and the fact that I did not trust anyone alone with my children. I would always need to know where they were every minute of the day.

The affects of disclosure weighed heavily on my husband [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] had been labelled a first degree Paedophile and is still fighting this, as he never was one. He was only 15 when I was pregnant and was a minor himself and therefore should never have been classified as this. We are married and been together for 54 years and everything that occurred in our intimate relationship was consensual. [REDACTED] had to fight for nine months to be able to get his Working with Children Check. It was never fully cleared and was dropped from first degree to second degree. It is time for [REDACTED] to renew his Working with Children Check and he is still fighting to have his name cleared of this and have all references removed from his record.

Support

No support was ever provided from any parties involved at the time except for that counselling being received which was offered more recently.

I have been receiving counselling from an Independent Psychologist not connected to the hospital or Sisters of Mercy. My local doctor referred me to my Psychologist.

I did not receive an apology or an acknowledgement of the abuse you had suffered by anybody until recently. The Sisters of Mercy have only acknowledged and apologised in writing in August 2012.

The sisters of Mercy did not remove me from the hospital but did keep me imprisoned in the home and it was on their premises the sexual assault took place.

I have not received an apology from [REDACTED], who was working for Catholic Family Welfare at the time, or the Royal Women's Hospital. The Royal Women's Hospital still denies having any knowledge that I was removed from the hospital or of [REDACTED] actions.

It has been nearly 50 years since this occurred. The counselling I am receiving now is assisting me in working through the events, however, it has been such a long time since the abuse and abduction occurred until counselling was provided that a lot of pain and anguish has been experienced and no amount of counselling will erase what I had to endure then and still have to live with now.

Result

It has taken nearly 50 years to get this acknowledgement, apology and compensation from the Sisters of Mercy. I have been gathering information for many years to try and prove everything that I have been through did occur. Approximately five years discussions started with Sisters of Mercy but back then everything was denied. It has only been recently that any result has been achieved.

The Sisters of Mercy have formally accepted responsibility about their involvement in the situation and have provided this in writing. This is also in the form of financial compensation as acknowledgement of what I have been through; the sexual abuse and the housing of me from when [REDACTED] delivered me to the Home.

No other party that is fully aware of my situation has done anything to address this beyond the Sisters of Mercy.

I was not satisfied with the process in dealing with my complaint with the hospital, the Sisters of Mercy or with [REDACTED] for the Catholic Family Welfare. I would not be putting in this submission if I were satisfied.

I am fighting for Justice and to clear my husband's name when there was no wrongdoing on his part. My husband has had three heart attacks and prostate cancer during this time and has constantly supported me no matter how ill he has been. He also is suffering from Depression as a result of this situation and the length of time it has been going on for. He also seeks assistance from his doctor to manage this.

[REDACTED] is unable to discuss any of this and does not cope talking about it therefore I am his advocate in any issues relating to this. He signed a letter with the solicitors for me to act on his behalf.

Counselling has assisted, however no amount of counselling or monetary compensation will ever remove the memories of the nightmare I had to live through and still do. It has also affected my ability to have an intimate sexual relationship with my husband and we have only had intercourse twice in the past 20 years. I have a husband who is very supportive of me and dedicated to our marriage and family.

Summary

I may have escaped and therefore thankfully was able to keep my baby however the trauma and shame that I have had to live with for all of these years has had major consequences on my life.

I have to live with the impact it has had on my relationships with my husband and children, and the way I communicate with my family. As a consequence of the events I had to endure and trauma I still suffer from, my partner and children have been indirectly affected by the events and should never have had to.

I want the public to become more aware of the people we allow to represent our country and those that they support. Such an example of this is the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott. [REDACTED]

Most importantly though is that I want to see all parties involved in the events (as outlined above) to be held accountable for this happening and to stop it from happening to any other child in a similar situation now or in the future. The parties involved include, the State Government, the Royal Women's Hospital, the Sisters of Mercy, the Heads of Catholic Archdiocese of Australia, the man who sexually assaulted me and the Sister involved, and the Family Welfare Service whom [REDACTED] worked for at the time.

Jennifer Howe

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