

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 15 March 2013

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Ms B. Coughlan.

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome Ms Brenda Coughlan. I thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation committee members may have some questions relating to both your submission, which you have provided to us, and the evidence we are going to hear from you. Thank you very much for being before us, and please commence when you are ready.

Ms COUGHLAN — I probably sound a little bit shaky, but something just happened outside that has thrown me a bit.

The CHAIR — Please take your time, Brenda.

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes. It has thrown me a bit. I was all ready, and now it has thrown me a little bit.

I am a spokesperson for the Independent Regional Mothers, and I wish to address the criminal abuse and violence inflicted by those in white coats against minors. I suffered a hysterectomy in my early 20s from the damage that was inflicted upon me. Behind white coats is a trail of carnage and criminal violence that can never be healed, committed by persons in trust. It does not matter whether the perpetrator is a man with a white coat or a white collar; the prosecution is not based on an occupation.

The Nuremberg code was put into place as an international document of law to protect civilisation, including myself, but the medical profession in Australia has rejected it.

In 1997 there were a lot of media reports on the allegations about minors being used as guinea pigs. A draft and confidential report dated November 1997, which has never been released, reports these violations of minors' human rights from 1946.

I just want to quote from the report, which is the most disgusting thing I have ever read:

There was a perception that the code was an overreaction to the atrocities of the work of 'Nazi doctors' and the rejection of the medical science community in the first principle of absolute requirement for consent. That principle would in effect preclude any research on children.

It repeatedly states that no mention is made of informed consent or other ethical approvals being sought or granted. The researchers were aware of the risks of local and systemic acute side effects, and whilst the medical profession might have eradicated diseases, they did not have clinical freedom allowing for the exploitation of vulnerable minors or the eradication of families.

In 2004 further illegal trials were revealed of contaminated Salk vaccine being distributed between 1958 and 1962. I was the researcher.

The medical profession confirmed their position by publicly stating and publishing in a medical journal on 30 July 1960 that the medical profession was above the law and they could ignore the law. They criminally crossed professional boundaries in medicine to patient exploitation. In the 1960s they criminally abused non-pregnant girls in government and non-government institutions without informed consent as part of their medical research to find an IVF solution. The hospitals, in partnerships with universities, treated these non-pregnant girls in torturous, horrific, degrading, humiliating and illegal internal and external examinations as routine, without consent. They also had deep-sleep therapy and were medicated, after being sexually abused, and raped. Many girls were sterilised, robbing them of motherhood. Many girls were treated with hormone-stimulant drugs to harvest more than one egg, to between 5.8 and 17 eggs per non-pregnant girl, without consent. In institutions, the ova was then stolen from these bodies during a horrific physical examination, with the laboratories working on human embryo cells, unbeknown to the public, as early as 1962, without consent.

They were also experimenting with umbilical cords as far back as 1952 without consent. I table a heartbreaking testimony of a friend — who should be sitting next to me right now but who passed away on 25 November 2012— containing very graphic details of medical practitioners' inhumane treatment, including

rape, that she received when she was in institutional care. She wrote it herself just before she passed away so I could table it today.

There is another testimony that states, 'Often this involved up to four screws, called training officers, to pin a young girl in a position common with internal examination. As many were virgins and knew this procedure was not only humiliating but unnecessary, they fought and sustained vaginal cuts and injuries as well as broken hymens'.

They continued their criminal savage crimes on young pregnant girls under the banner 'modern medical outlook', introduced on 28 May 1958 as the second part of their IVF research. Medical practitioners put into place enslavement clinics on specific dates for young pregnant girls. In medical clinics during pregnancy I was faced with physical and emotional situations. Frightened, my motherly instincts kicked in, but I was still unable to protect my baby in utero. She was referred to as a 'lump' by perpetrators, both of our identities stripped. In the same manner as the identity of all babies and children from institutional care were exploited from 1946, we were exploited, we were disposable mothers.

My body was forcibly examined without consent, not by 1, not by 2 but by up to 12 male medical students at a time — different hands, without consent, brutally and cruelly thrust inside my body one after the other, over and over again; at the same time, strangers' hands cruelly pulling at my breasts, pushing at my stomach, with the excuse given that in 1980 it was just part of medical students' training.

I was eventually able to train my mind to visualise on an item in the cubicle so that the pain and the trespassing on my body by a group of males could be endured. I was barbarically and criminally tied down with shackles. I was torturously treated during labour. I was entrapped. I was defenceless. I was petrified and frightened. Newborn babies were immediately abducted at birth as per the written instructions by medical superintendents, with their futures placed in the hands of social workers and not their mother. The medical superintendents in the 1960s convinced all authorities to entice young pregnant girls and give haven to them as a means to fill the nurseries, which is an indictable crime of entrapment even still today.

Their criminal actions continued. Against our will as minors we were inhumanely injected — a crime then and a crime today — with heroin, a criminalised drug banned by the commonwealth government in 1956, or LSD, pituitary hormones, suppressing the lactation during labour, without consent and with the potential to affect babies in utero. The question is always raised: where were the police? These were illegal drugs. Why did they not raid these places?

The use of LSD had the potential to poison a mother's body, with the reason why lactation was suppressed being that if a newborn baby had been brought to its mother's breast, their lives would have been put at risk. We were inhumanely labelled as sexual deviants or prostitutes, expected to be complicit with the punishment being inflicted on us, but many of us married the father of our child.

Medical practitioners kept the mothers, after abducting their babies, in a deep-sleep condition for days after giving birth, to manipulate their minds, the same as they did with non-pregnant girls: 'It all didn't happen. You didn't have a baby'. On the first, the second, the fourth, the sixth and the eighth days of life, without consent, they continued with their medical research in partnership with nursers and the Royal Children's Hospital. They trespassed, illegally removing tissues from a series of babies born consecutively at the hospital in 1963, less than 24 hours old, referred to as normal babies to measure the damage that may have occurred on the newborn babies' kidneys as a result of being subjected to LSD whilst in utero, all without consent.

Unidentified remains of state wards were uncovered in May 2004 on the Royal Children's Hospital grounds, but no identifying records are available. The site was never declared a crime scene by the police. To hide their identities and reasons for their deaths, their unidentified remains were cremated and the whereabouts of these ashes today are unknown. They were discarded like rubbish.

Further, there is a government site at the Preston cemetery, with nine children, one baby used in medical experiments. I table his record from the register and the correspondence regarding this site that was a request to assemble the names and the burial sites of children around Victoria who died in care, but the government has refused as the resources needed are too extensive. They deserve our respect — not the government, the babies.

In conclusion, the medical criminal abuse trespassing on tens of thousands of minors from 1946 to 1975, at the conclusion of the honorary medical system, as part of medical experiments and research, abductions of newborn babies without informed consent were acts of life-threatening criminal torture and sexual violence. But with the enormous power of the medical profession to cover up their criminal scandal at least equal to what the religious denominations are doing, we cannot allow it to continue from today.

The cost paid for such carnage is too high. There has been death, sterilisation, abduction, castration, criminal and sexual abuse, the destruction of families to create families, turning torture, destruction and violence into a lucrative business reaping a mere \$212 million 30 years later. The medical profession still today believe they are above the law and can hide their crimes. Some are guilty, but all are responsible — so much cover-up by so many. They believe the Nuremberg code was an overreaction. Their torturous criminal behaviour is still hidden behind their white coats, like others behind white collars — all equally as serious. They cannot be exonerated or vindicated. We received a life sentence; we can never receive parole, and we can never receive a pardon. Their white coats can no longer protect them, the same as the white collars can no longer protect religious denominations.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Brenda, for sharing your insights and stories with us this afternoon. I know you have given us a very detailed submission, which we have read, and you have commented on a number of causes and suggestions in this. Can I ask you what women like yourself are looking for, what you think justice, if you like, in relation to what you have been through would be.

Ms COUGHLAN — I believe there has to be justice, and the greatest way of receiving justice is to expose the truth.

The CHAIR — By coming forward and speaking at an inquiry like this?

Ms COUGHLAN — No. I just think that the more that people talk about it, the more it is recorded, the more people get educated. I think there is a letter there that you will see from the AMA where we have tried so hard to get them just to meet and talk. Independent Regional Mothers— we have tried so hard just to get the medical profession to talk.

The CHAIR — Have you had any meetings with the AMA?

Ms COUGHLAN — The latest correspondence says: I advise that the board has discussed your request, and at this time we will not be making any public statement about the issue. That was on 29 June 2012. We went back to them on 22 July 2012 and have had no more communication. We did try with the national AMA. They had a conference at the Hilton Hotel, I think it was in June — in 2011. We were hoping to be able to just go and speak to the medical profession. It is not a matter of going there and yelling and screaming at them and saying, ‘This is what you did’. It is a matter of just getting them to sit down, recognising what they did and acknowledging what they did.

The CHAIR — Have you ever met with any representatives from the medical profession?

Ms COUGHLAN — They will not talk. We did have a very positive meeting with Dr Anne Ellison of the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. They were wonderful. They took it all in and said that they were thinking of making a module for psychiatrists to understand it. I am not quite sure where that is at the moment, but that is what they were prepared to do. We were really pleased with that because it is education. If the next lot of psychiatrists and psychologists have an understanding, that is how we heal. That is what they are doing; I am not sure what the latest is with Anne Ellison, but they were very positive.

Mrs COOTE — Brenda, thank you. We have not heard anything like this before, so thank you very much indeed for telling us this.

Ms COUGHLAN — It is my pleasure.

Mrs COOTE — You rightly say that they were very vulnerable girls who probably did not know what their legal rights were and felt that the doctors knew what they were doing and that it was okay. How did you realise that you were not alone and that there was a whole heap of other people as well?

Ms COUGHLAN — How did I know? I probably did not realise until several years later. Probably the first time I realised something was not right was after my fiancé and I got married and I became pregnant again. It was the treatment. There were none of all those examinations and all that, and I thought, ‘This is different’. That was when I started the thought pattern that something was not quite right. Then when I was blessed I got very ill — I got cancer from the drugs that they had given me — and they wanted to do a hysterectomy, but I was determined that I wanted another one. When I had her, I clinically died, and I knew then that something was really wrong with me.

That is when I started to do research. I bumped into somebody at the Public Record Office Victoria. They were looking for a similar record to what I was looking for, and I thought, ‘I’m not the only one’. Then the doors opened, and Janet came into my life, as did other people — and we all realised that we were not alone. That then took us on a course of starting to realise that something was not right. Over the 30 years that I have been researching, it has been amazing what records are available at the public records office. There is never a government record lost, and I am always the researcher who, if someone says to me, ‘There are no records’, knows darn well that there are. If you are looking for dogs, you go and look under ‘cats’, because you will find them.

I also knew the late Honourable Vernon Wilcox because in my professional career I had a lot to do with politicians. I had a lot to do with Vernon Wilcox, and we used to talk about it. He enlightened me that something was not right. I kept getting, ‘Something is not right here’, so I did not give up. I had to keep going to find the bottom line.

Mrs COOTE — Did you ever speak about this with the health services commissioner, Beth Wilson?

Ms COUGHLAN — I would not have anything to do with Beth Wilson, because she would not touch a mother. Several mothers went to Beth Wilson when she was the health commissioner, and she just dismissed them.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you very much indeed. I found that very powerful.

Ms HALFPENNY — Thanks for coming. In your submission you have some suggestions about different policies or procedures that should be put in place, and this committee is looking at things to ensure that there is not abuse into the future. I know you talk about current policies, protocols and frameworks and that you do not believe there are current policies to protect young people from the medical profession. Could you explain in a bit more detail the sorts of things you think could protect children?

Ms COUGHLAN — This is only from research, but I think the medical profession does not have in place the same set-up as Towards Healing — I do not want to refer to the Catholic Church, because I am a Catholic — and other religious denominations. The medical profession does not have mandatory reporting either. I got hold of their statistics from 2000 to 2009, and 25 per cent of medical complaints were for sexual misconduct, and there is no mandatory reporting. It is so similar to religious denominations, it nearly runs parallel. I believe there has to be a separate body where people can go to report medical practitioners. If you have to go to the perpetrator — they are not really the one to deal with it.

Ms HALFPENNY — When you are talking about mandatory reporting, do you mean that other staff who see something should be required to report that?

Ms COUGHLAN — One of the things that really gets to me is that there were nurses and social workers. There is no mandatory reporting. Maybe they protect their jobs — I am not sure — but it is very similar. No-one will speak up, and I think that is a great shame. In the year 2013 everyone should raise their voices, but there does not seem to be a system in place where anyone can go to report. Maybe they have changed their mandatory reporting, but there does not seem to be a body.

The CHAIR — There is a complaint system, as Mrs Coote highlighted, in the health services commissioner, that people can go to to complain. I know we are talking about an issue — but in 2013 there is that body they can go to if they have a complaint about what has happened.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you very much, Brenda. In a number of passages in your submission you make references to parallels between the manner in which you perceive this inquiry has responded to the allegations against the Catholic Church.

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes, I do.

Mr O'BRIEN — You say the committee has been quite strong. I am not going to take issue with that. I just want to say that we respond to the submissions that are before us. There have been a number of victims and perhaps more in relation to that institution than others, but our terms of reference are general, in a sense, in that regard and relate to crimes.

What I am asking you in relation to the field you have identified essentially of medical malpractice and other crimes; I think you mentioned deaths, and rapes and things that were quite horrific, is — —

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — Have you been to the police, and I am not saying that you might have been and — —

Ms COUGHLAN — The police are not interested.

Mr O'BRIEN — But have you been?

Ms COUGHLAN — My father went to the police when I was pregnant, and they said to my father, 'It wouldn't be happening. She must be in love with the doctor. It's all a fantasy'. Many mothers did go to the police. I recall a story that was relayed recently where a mother did go to the police and was told, 'Go home. You can't be a mother'. The police leave a lot to be desired. They are not interested in medical crimes.

Mr O'BRIEN — If I can just break down that answer, there may be different responses from the police force over time. In other words, just like there were different attitudes in the medical profession over time and different attitudes in the Catholic Church and other institutions over time, that may be part of the problem in the sense that, similar to other victims, you believed in authority at the time, or you were led to believe in authority and there was nowhere for you to turn. To your knowledge has there been any inquiry by the medical profession or any other government institution into these problems specifically that have occurred with a historical perspective?

Ms COUGHLAN — There was a commonwealth Senate inquiry into forced adoptions, for which a national apology is coming up next week, but that is talking about what happened after. The baby did not just appear.

Mr O'BRIEN — You are talking about sexual malpractice in the medical profession in particular in that qualification.

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes, they will not address it. There is the letter.

Mr O'BRIEN — Yes, so you would like an inquiry specifically into medical malpractice leading to rapes and other invasive procedures that have two defences as I see it: that was the best practice at the time — and I am not saying that is right or wrong — —

Ms COUGHLAN — No, I understand that.

Mr O'BRIEN — That is what some people might say. Now as a society we would say that with the benefit of hindsight it should not have taken place. Secondly, with some of the instances you have identified, there would be a response that even under the best practice at the time that particular event should not have happened and that perhaps that particular event constituted a crime. Is that the sort of thing you are seeking?

Ms COUGHLAN — Now you put that question to me, sexual abuse is sexual abuse. It does not matter whether it happened 20 years ago or 50 years ago, but, as you probably already know, Australia was not really that interested, I suppose. They never really looked at sexual abuse in the 1960s, and I think it was not until the 1970s when it became, 'We'd better start looking at this'. If I am correct, Senator McLucas made it public in November 2011 that the commonwealth committee on forgotten Australians were absolutely horrified at the

sexual abuse of these non-pregnant girls. What they went through in institutional care was horrendous. They were crimes even when they happened.

Whether there needs to be an inquiry into the past treatment of medical practitioners — maybe that is the answer. From my personal point of view I would like them to sit down and talk. There has got to be a way it can be resolved. I am not sure. All we have wanted to do is sit down and talk.

Mr O'BRIEN — With the medical profession?

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — So the AMA in this instance.

Ms COUGHLAN — Sit down and talk.

Mr O'BRIEN — Of course we would advise that anyone who believes that a crime has been committed can contact the police.

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — And the police will then go through any process of taking a statement and identifying whether in fact a crime has been committed.

Ms COUGHLAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — Brenda, thank you very much. On behalf of the committee I thank you again for coming before us this afternoon and for providing your evidence. It has been most helpful. Thank you.

Ms COUGHLAN — Just before I go, I did not copy the report because it is a Victorian government report. Do you want details of it, because it is the one that has all the details — —

The CHAIR — If you can provide it to the secretariat after — —

Ms COUGHLAN — Is that okay?

The CHAIR — That is fine if you would like to.

Ms COUGHLAN — I think that even though it is a government report, it has never been released. I got it through freedom of information. I really think it is something you would — —

The CHAIR — Yes, that is fine if you would like to submit it to the secretariat.

Ms COUGHLAN — All right, and I will leave those documents. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you again, Brenda. That concludes our public hearing for today, so I ask members of the public gallery to make their way out.

Witness withdrew.