

From: [Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria](#)
To: [forcedadoptionsinquiry](#)
Subject: New Submission to Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria
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Inquiry Name: Inquiry into responses to historical forced adoptions in Victoria



SUBMISSION CONTENT:

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I went to the Without Consent exhibition in Geelong in January this year. I had worked at the Royal Women's Hospital 1972 – 1973 as a student midwife, so the exhibition was evocative for me of the attitudes and practices of that time.

After seeing the exhibition I remembered some photos I had taken with a fellow midwife of a couple of the adoption babies we cared for in 1972, and I contacted VANISH to discuss whether it was possible to pass on the photos to the mothers of the babies. It was suggested that I make a submission to the Inquiry.

My memories after almost 50 years are mainly in the form of fragments but I hope that I can provide some information on the context and issues of those days. I originally wrote the attached information to accompany the photos when they were passed on to the mothers.

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File1: [5e5b1226f100e-Response .docx](#)

File2:

File3:

The story of the photos

My midwifery training began at the end of 1972 at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. A 12-month course, and after an initial teaching block we went straight into 3 months of night duty in December. The general understanding was that this was planned to happen early in our training so the hospital ensured they would get the night duty labour out of us before, and if, we decide to leave before completing the course.

When we arrived for night duty on hot summer evenings we walked across the Cardigan St car park which was towered over by the hospital building, with the ward nurseries on each floor looking down on us. The hospital had no air con in those days, and the nursery windows would be open to let in fresh air, even on the most humid nights. The sound of the babies crying in unison rising out of the nursery windows on six floors was an amazing sound. It didn't sound like collective distress, more like the very recognisable sound of dozens of newborn demanding attention and care.

On night shift my friend [REDACTED] and I were on the 5th floor. It was the floor predominantly for A babies. Babies for Adoption.

The young mothers were in the post-natal section of the ward, struggling with loneliness, full of bravado, forming new friendships, unsure of the future, and suffering the pain of 'suppression of lactation', From my memory there was no medication given to help, just strapping the breasts down with a breast binder, a rectangular calico sheet, firmly pinned around their chests.

The babies were in the nursery in the same ward as the mothers, They were lined up in their perspex cots in the nursery, located in the middle of the ward. Rows of tiny beautiful newborn babies. They were labelled and referred to by the surname of the mother. Baby Smith, Baby Wilson. On our night shift Lyn and I had the job of feeding and settling them throughout our shift. 4hrly formula feeds, some 3 hourly, already mixed and measured into labelled bottles which we would warm in a plastic jug. When the feeds were completed they were neatly charted. We would change the babies and the day shift would bath and weigh them.

Some of the babies were restless and didn't settle easily. It was not unusual for a student midwife to be cuddling and carrying a baby for several hours each night. And it was a common sight for a student midwife to be almost falling asleep with a tiny baby propped on her shoulder.

During the night the young mothers would come in twos or threes, unable to sleep and gaze through the windows of the nursery. I don't remember them being forbidden to come and look or seek out their babies but I do remember it was discouraged, and there was no process for making them welcome and letting them spend time with, or nurse their babies.

As student midwives we were all aged around 21 or 22. A few of us were older. But the majority of us were fresh from our general nursing training, and keen to get midwifery under our belts before we went adventuring further afield.

When I recall the young women, I remember fresh faced, innocent young women, unpretentious and sometimes surprisingly worldly. They would have been only a few years younger than us, some of us had younger sisters the same age. And by this time in our lives we had all had our fair share of unwanted pregnancy experiences through friends, family and among ourselves. We had seen teenage couples marry, which seemed to be the only way to keep the baby, and had friends relinquish their babies.

Some of the young mothers came to us via residential services for unmarried mothers and some of them came from Winlaton which was a juvenile justice facility in Nunawading. One memory I have is of some of these young women, after the birth of their babies being given Depo Provera, the injectable contraceptive, before their discharge.

And we were riding on the historic changes that came with getting access to the pill.

We were working hard, having a good time and trying to keep out of trouble. I really feel we didn't unpack or understand what was happening in our work place, and nationally on such a wide scale.

We thought the babies were beautiful and we fed them and cuddled them and settled them. It was almost other worldly, as they were adoption babies and there was no proper understanding promoted in thinking of the young women as their mothers with the rights of parents. The fate of the babies was in the hands of the social workers, in our eyes they were powerful, faceless women who administered the adoption process. To us the babies were perfect and they were in our care. We loved them all, not in a maternal way, more in a way which recognised each baby's loveability. We all had favourites and we didn't contemplate their lives beyond the ward nursery.

As the years went on and the grief and distress of women who had been forced and coerced to relinquish their babies became understood, and we as midwives had moved on to other jobs and places, when we caught up with each other we would say we were a part of this, we were there and we were part of this awful injustice and cruelty which still echoes through the lives of so many. We share the responsibility.

