



Background Information - Apology for Forced Adoptions

Background

For well over a century Berry Street has worked to assist, support and advocate for the most vulnerable children, women and families in Victoria. We take pride in that history and our contribution to people's lives and to the Victorian community.

Until 1975, Berry Street (and as it was previously called, Berry Street Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home) acted among other things, as an adoption agency. Like many such organisations, at a particular point in our long history, we now know that we were involved in the system now described as forced adoptions.

What is meant by Forced Adoption?

Forced adoption practices were investigated in 2000 by a NSW Parliamentary Inquiry and in 2010 by an Australian Senate committee inquiry. Those inquiries used the term *Forced Adoption* to describe the systemic practice of coercing or deceiving mothers into the adoption of their children soon after the birth of the child. Both Inquiries formally exposed the truth that many young women did not freely relinquish their child. The Senate Inquiry investigated adoption practices from the 1950's, 60's and 70's. They heard overwhelming evidence of the forced removal of babies from their vulnerable young mothers and the placing of those children for adoption without the proper consent of mothers. Welfare agencies were often involved in caring for young women before they went to hospital to give birth and for arranging adoptions.

The Senate inquiry did not investigate the actions of each agency involved. However they concluded that at some level agencies in all States and Territories involved in adoption became part of this prevailing system of forced adoption. They found that it became common for agencies to disregard the rights of women to make their own decisions regarding the future of their children and to coerce women into signing consent documents. They heard evidence of children being forcibly removed at birth by hospital staff and placed for adoption with no consent documents having been signed. And they highlighted that during this period it was common for agencies to presume that children would be better off with married couples and that this belief influenced them to place children with infertile couples who were seeking to adopt.

In summary, this system of forced adoption actively separated newborn babies from their mostly young, unmarried and vulnerable mothers, often without a mother's consent, and placed those babies for adoption. Where consent was given it was often under duress.

A key recommendation of the Senate inquiry was that all governments and non-government agencies involved in adoption from that period should make a full apology to the mothers, children and families affected by forced adoption practices. They also provided advice on the key issues that an apology should address.

Why is Berry Street making this Apology?

Berry Street was an adoption agency from the 1870s through to 1975. Having regard to the recommendations of the Senate Inquiry, and in any event, Berry Street decided that it was important and appropriate to make an apology.

We now know that from 1955 through to 1975, a period examined by the Senate Inquiry, the number and proportion of children we placed for adoption escalated. At this time Berry Street provided accommodation for young pregnant unmarried women, liaised with maternity hospitals regarding obstetric care for the women and organised the placement of relinquished children with couples wanting to adopt children.

During this period it became much more common that a young pregnant woman who came to stay with Berry Street would 'relinquish' her child for adoption. Fewer of the women who stayed with us during this time were supported to keep their children. During this 20 year period, Berry Street was responsible for the placement of an estimated 436 children for adoption. We do not know how many of these adoptions could be considered forced adoptions.

Following an apology by the Victorian State Government in 2012, Berry Street was approached by women who told us that they had been with Berry Street in the early 1960s and been affected by forced adoption. These women recommended that Berry Street make an apology to acknowledge and assist all those affected. At the time these women approached Berry Street we were considering an apology. The finalised apology has been developed with input and advice from these women, their children and families, for which we are very grateful.

We believe that apologising for past wrongs is true to our organisational Values of Courage, Respect, Working Together, Accountability and Integrity.

How did this happen?

Berry Street operated a seven-bed accommodation service for pregnant young women and a nursery for newborn children and toddlers. Children in the nursery included children who had been separated from their mothers as well as wards of the State awaiting adoption or placement in foster care.

Young, unmarried pregnant women often came to Berry Street for help. Some were isolated from their families and communities and came to us of their own volition and others were referred by doctors and hospitals. Others were brought to us by parents who sought to have their daughter relinquish her child in order to avoid what many in the community of the time saw as the 'shame' of being an unmarried mother.

We now believe that in 1955 and 1956 the Berry Street Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home, influenced heavily by senior professionals in the medical profession, shifted the focus of our work. Supporting young pregnant women with whatever choice they made for the future of their baby gave way to influencing them to make their children available to adopt to infertile couples.

Our research found the following comment recorded in the Berry Street Foundling Hospital and Infants' Home Annual Report of 1968:

As I stated in my report twelve months ago, the Royal Women's Hospital is attempting to cope with an increasing number of young unmarried mothers seeking medical care. The problem of placing these girls during the latter part of their pregnancy is a constant worry to the Social Services Department of that institution. When the Medical Superintendent addressed the Honorary Medical Staff and the Board of Management of Berry Street Hospital earlier this year, I am confident he convinced the authorities that the best way to fill the nursery, and to satisfy the many requests for adoption, was to accept, and give haven to, the young mother during the third trimester of her ante natal period (Berry Street Honorary Obstetrician).

Whilst care is required in interpreting an extract from an annual report given over 40 years ago, the implication of this statement, typical of the period, seems clear - that a key purpose of the service was to satisfy the many requests for adoption.

Regretfully, we now believe that we may not have adequately supported some of these young women to express their own wishes in relation to their baby's care. We believe this was wrong and utterly at odds with the approach this agency had taken when it had provided long-term support to many young women in similar circumstances in earlier periods of our history.

In this regard, we believe Berry Street lost its way during this period and in doing so let down some of those young vulnerable women and their families.

We have listened to some of the mothers' experiences and heard of the pain they endured for decades after their children were adopted and the barriers they faced when they searched to find their children. These women suffered a visceral and fundamental loss - the separation from her infant child.

We now know that some young women resisted the adoptions process and were vocal in their opposition to what was happening to them and their baby. Others have told us they were utterly overwhelmed by their situation and the pressures they faced, feeling powerless to resist what appeared to be inevitable - that their baby would be taken from them and adopted. Others came to us in the hope that with us to support them, they might begin their journey as a new mother.

What are we apologising for?

Berry Street is acknowledging and apologising for the intergenerational harm, trauma, grief and loss caused to the women, children and families who were affected by forced adoption practices.

We now understand that some adoption practices from the late 1950s to the early 1970s included what must be described as coercing, deceiving and harassing vulnerable young mothers into signing consent documents after their babies had been removed. This practice served to create and perpetuate a cruel lie - that these women did not want their children. We now know that adoption practices at the time may also have included withholding information to extinguish the name of and connection to the natural father.

We now know that some adoptive parents were misled into believing that the children they took into their homes were unwanted and had been freely relinquished, when this was not always the case.

To whom are we apologising?

The pain and grief of forced adoption can last a lifetime and is often felt through the generations. We acknowledge those young mothers who desperately wanted to keep their babies. Further, we acknowledge others harmed by forced adoption - fathers, children denied the natural bond of mother and family, adoptive parents who were misled and extended families. It is to them we wish to apologise.