

My Submission to the Productivity Commission into Mental Health.

I started writing this history of my experiences of Mental Health on 25/1/2019 I am sixty-nine years old. I have been both a consumer i.e. a person with a mental illness, now diagnosed in my case as Anxiety Disorder, and a Mental Health Practitioner working as a Masters qualified Art Therapist.

My experience of mental illness started in March 1967 when I was 17 in my final H.S.C. year of secondary school. I changed from a cheerful gregarious teenager to an introverted loner after a weekend spent silent and fasting in my bed. My parents were understandably concerned about this and when I refused to go to school the next week, the headmistress from my school suggested they take me to the Psych Unit at Prince Henry Hospital at La Perouse. The headmistress threatened to come and see me herself if I didn't agree to go. At the hospital my parents and I had an interview with a psychiatrist, who has since become well known in the field of mental health. He gave me two alternatives – 1) Go back to school the next day and come and talk with a social worker weekly as an outpatient or 2) Be admitted.

I chose going back to school. I saw the social worker out at the Coast Hospital weekly for about five months after that. I usually refused to talk to her. She just let me sit there silently. She lent me novels by Iris Murdoch and gradually I thawed out enough to chat to her a bit about them, but I never discussed and I did not in fact know, what was bothering me.

I was a good student at a selective High School and despite my breakdown, I managed to study hard enough to gain my HSC with Level 1 passes in English and Art and Level 2 passes in Science, Maths and French. Having gained a Commonwealth Scholarship, I started ARTS I at Sydney Uni in 1968. I could not adjust to university life socially, academically or emotionally and dropped out in September. The Uni Counsellor I had seen a couple of months before did not pick up

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on my deep struggle. He treated me as if he was a jovial uncle and I was a frivolous girl only interested in parties and clothes and the opposite sex.

My early experiences of mental illness resulted in my being frequently lonely and unhappy. Also my evident intelligence was not channelled constructively towards building a career or economic independence. The government paid for my tertiary study and the Commonwealth Scholarship; my parents supported me living at home with four younger siblings on only my father's modest wage and the inadequate mental health treatment systems in place 50 years ago to stop young people falling through the gaps failed me.

Then I decided to follow a more practical course than "studying airy-fairy subjects in an ivory tower at university". In 1969, I took up the Teacher's College Scholarship I had also been offered based on my high HSC results. I embarked on the General Primary Teaching (3 year trained) course at Alexander Mackie Teacher's College in Paddington, receiving \$12 per week living allowance and all my tuition fees and expenses for all that time. My general mood was even for much of that time because I had found a steady boyfriend. My father passed away midway through the course. I suppressed my grief, as was normal in the society of the early 1970s. Not expressing my grief contributed partly to my later mental health problems.

Earlier in the year when my Dad died, I sought help from my Year Support Teacher at College for the strange dreads I sometimes felt. That only resulted in a single unsatisfactory appointment at Prince Henry Hospital again with a Junior Registrar in the Psych Unit. I had recently had a significant upheaval in my relationship with my boyfriend. The young doctor's dismissive advice was "Don't put all your eggs in one basket"! Very unhelpful!

Because of that episode, the NSW Dept of Education knew about my nervous troubles and refused to cover me 100% in their health insurance scheme when I started teaching in 1972. Their psychiatric assessor was an elderly man who told me "Our brain is like a mouse trying to control the elephant of our feelings."

These professionals whom I was being sent to see were men of their time. I am not blaming them for their lack of insight or inability to effectively deal with my problems. I am blaming the health system, which was so patently inadequate. Although now that we have Head Space and Beyond Blue and Community Centres, are things any better? Has the incidence of mental illness really increased so exponentially in proportion to head of population? Or, did so many young people of my era go undiagnosed and unhelped like I did, resulting in us not being included in the statistics?

I taught Kindergarten classes at Public Schools in the Bankstown area with mainly migrant pupils for five terms from Jan 1972 to August 1973. I felt out of my depth because of my lack of discipline strategies. Teacher's College had not prepared me for teaching kids with little English, neither for the hurly-burly of the classroom. New teachers were not mentored or provide with professional development. In 1973 I started living with my boyfriend because of a problem at my family home. This added the burden of housekeeping for us both to my attempts to get on my feet in my fledgling teaching career.

I left teaching feeling completely unsuited to the role and upset about my failure in it. The Cost to the Government was their investment in three years of Teacher's College. The cost to me was nearly five years of my young life trying to fit myself into the role of being a teacher. Not only that, but I lost the assured career path and security and status that continuing to be a teacher would have given me.

The Government did recoup a couple of thousand dollars from me as for the next few difficult years I had to pay them back my Teacher's Bond. The next career path I decided very unwisely to take based on expensive private career advice from Chandler McLeod was a more scientific type of employment. With the aim of maybe becoming a nutritionist I enrolled in Science I at Sydney Uni in 1974. My Science and Maths secondary studies were not at a high enough level for this course. I was deluding myself to even attempt it. My de-facto partner also started studying Arts I at

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NSW Uni, so we were very poor, working part-time in menial jobs to support ourselves while studying full time. His mother had life-threatening cancer at this time.

I broke down during the final exams in 1974 and needed to be hospitalised at Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital for an Acute Schizophrenic Episode. The stress of studying, taking stimulants to stay awake and some very minor experimentation with cannabis contributed to my serious illness. I was left on the antipsychotic drug Stelazine after being discharged from hospital. The side effects of dulled affect and the “Stelazine stomps” meant that I was now a 25 year-old young woman branded with the stigma of a severe mental illness diagnosis and no prospects in the world. I was also traumatized after my experiences of rough handling and degradation during the two weeks of my hospitalisation.

In 1975 I started full time work as a Data Control Clerk at NCR and thus began my half-dead years when I was paid very low wages and struggled to keep my brain alive. Chandler McLeod had told me that my IQ was in the top 1% of the population and here I was working in a routine clerical job. I had a more minor ASE relapse in 1977 while working at a printing factory, also as a clerk. After that, I felt like a second-class citizen when I was occasionally forced to attend Marrickville Community Centre to check up on my mental health.

The next eight years of my life were characterized by a chequered pattern of desultory low-level jobs interspersed with long periods of unemployment. I continued to do 99% of the home-making activities and unpaid domestic duties involved in living with my boyfriend/de-facto and had serious “ups and downs” in our relationship over that time.

Our first daughter was born in March 1986 and immediately all was not well with my mental state. I was 36 years old, a mother for the first time, isolated in a grotty old flat in Stanmore with no hot water supply in the kitchen. My partner did not have a clue either about stopping a demanding baby’s crying or supporting a new mum emotionally.

So once again, the State came to the rescue. The Tresillian Family Care Centre diagnosed me with Postnatal Depression. The psychiatrist I saw at Balmain was free on Medicare. The tri-cyclic anti-depressants she made me take could have harmed the baby as I refused to stop breastfeeding. The best support I received was from Nursing Mothers Association – a group run by the mothers themselves, though probably to some extent funded by the government.

I gave birth to another daughter in 1988 with no repeat of PND and we acquired our first home and a mortgage in 1989. In my 40th year, I became a real adult aiming towards the firm goal of paying off that mortgage. I concentrated all the energy I could spare from housework and childrearing on that aim for the next seven years, working part-time and sharing the domestic tasks with my de-facto husband who worked mostly at night as a musician.

Then a blow struck my family of origin. My brother had AIDS and returned to Australia from New York in a very weakened state. My GP diagnosed me with major depression caused by my grief about my brother's illness and subsequent death at 40 years old in 1995. My GP acted as my counsellor. I made weekly visits to him for years – a huge cost to the Medicare system. He put me on various medications including Aropax, and then Zyprexa, which cost a lot to the government. He was prescribing it off label and had to write to Canberra every time he renewed the prescription. The lady in the chemist shop where I bought Zyprexa told me disapprovingly that I was costing the Government a lot of money.

The side effects of these strong medications exacted a huge toll on my family and me. I gained weight, was always irritable and drowsy and never felt the fog lift in my head. I took them on and off for about five years never feeling or acting like myself all that time.

We moved away from that GP's area in 2000 and took on another mortgage in order to upgrade our home to accommodate our two teenage daughters more comfortably.

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I had worked part-time continuously in various administration jobs for a decade. Around the end of 1998, I started working in the disability sector at Disability Services Australia. I was still an admin clerk and after 5 years there, I discovered that I had a burning ambition to be an Art Therapist i.e. a counsellor using my lifelong talent for art. I had developed maturity and stability during my work at DSA.

Yes, originally they employed me as a client – a person with a disability. The GP provided them with a letter giving me the stigmatising diagnosis himself of Schizo-Affective Disorder. DSA received Government subsidies (probably under false pretences) for the whole time that I worked for them (over 5 years). However, I received the invaluable one-on-one support of one of their employment consultants. She treated me like a friend. We would meet outside the office regularly to have coffee while she listened to my problems. At last I received the kind of support I needed to blossom and grow.

I gained the Graduate Diploma of Expressive Therapies and the Master in Art Therapy from UWS at Kingswood after four years studying part-time and continuing to work part-time in an aged care home. I graduated at the end of 2007. I still have a student debt of around \$50,000. I worked as an Art Therapist till December 2017. My work was always part-time or short-term contracts never exceeding an annual income of \$25,000. Full time Art Therapist jobs are very rare in Sydney because it is a new profession which is only starting to be recognized and valued.

Very sadly, my elder daughter has also developed severe mental illness. Her economic, social and personal costs belong in another story. I started seeing a psychotherapist under the Mental Health Nurse Scheme in 2007 to deal with these huge family problems. For about eight years the Government subsidised my visits to her. Now, I pay \$170 per week out of my own savings for the benefit of one to one conversation with a professional, which prevents my mental health deteriorating. I deal with the problems of getting older, being retired, having a 99 year old mother, my two daughter's full on lives, my grandson's development as a fatherless child ... And on it goes.

I want you to understand what mental illness has cost personally and socially for one individual like me who is an ordinary person and the loss of economic productivity it has entailed for me and for Australia. Thank you to Jessica Irvine whose article in the Sydney Morning Herald on January 24th, 2019 inspired me to write this submission.

[Name Withheld]

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