

Mental Health Inquiry Productivity Commission

Submission

My daughter Sharon (DOB: 02/01/1970 – DOD 25/6/2017) had a history of mental illness with Dysthmic Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder and Boderline Personality Disorder. Sharon was placed into employment by a recruitment agency and unfortunately was subjected to an extended period of bullying and harassment by her colleagues. The distress of experiencing this bullying behaviour at work did affect Sharon's mental wellbeing and as a result Sharon took her own life. The Coroner's report acknowledged the bullying Sharon was subjected to, and outlines it as a contributing factor towards her suicide.

As well the extreme grief and heartache this has caused me and my family, I believe that Sharon's story is relevant to the Mental Health Inquiry being undertaken by the Productivity Commission. Sharon had previously received support with her mental health that enabled her to enter and remain in the workforce, which gave her opportunity for more social participation and productivity. However Sharon was severely let down not only by her colleagues who were relentlessly bullying her, calling her names, undermining her and even telling her to kill herself – she was also let down by others.

Sharon was let down by her employer and their Human Resources Department who did nothing to stop nor address the bullying and support Sharon. In addition, the recruitment agency that placed Sharon in this job also did not do anything to support Sharon in relation to the bullying issue let alone show adequate care and concern regarding its impact on her mental health. This is all evident the Coroner's report.

Aside from the fact that Sharon did not receive the help and support she needed at the time, there have been no repercussions, redress nor consequences with regards to the bullying. Ie a person can suffer from workplace bullying, it can affect their mental health significantly, and it can lead to the suicide of the person and there is nothing that is done despite all the evidence presented and shown in the Coroner's report. For a family already deeply hurt and grieving over the loss of a loved one, this seems to be unfair.

No one is held accountable nor responsible for their behaviour, including lack of behaviour nor neglect of their duty of care. Does the employer and recruitment agency have a duty of care with regards to occupational health and safety to "care" for the employee and their mental health? If an issue comes up like workplace bullying what will be done to support the victim and provide adequate consequences for the bully?

As Sharon's story shows, there was a systemic failure in relation to "employment" services and also a lack of involvement in terms of mental health services to provide support and suicide prevention intervention. Although three years have past, the grief, pain and loss is still felt by Sharon's family and any attempts to gain further answers or redress in relation to her death remain elusive.

I myself have tried contacting many people to assist me, not only directly in relation to Sharon's case but even on a wider scale so that in the future no other family has to experience what Sharon and my family has. It has been unsuccessful.

I have contacted the following people in order to understand the issues around my daughter's death and ways to highlight the issue of workplace bullying and mental health including

1. Jill Hennessy MP and Attorney General Victoria
2. Mr Alan Jones /4BC Radio
3. Sharon's employer, including Human Resources Department and Recruitment agency
4. Fair Work Australia
5. Bill Henderson – Productivity Commission
6. Slater and Gordon Legal Firm (Melbourne and Brisbane offices)
7. MP for Oxley Milton Dick
8. Qld State MP Jessica Pugg

My responses have been mixed and varied. It has been disappointing to not receive responses such as the one promised by HR manager of my daughter's employer a year ago. The grief and loss over losing one's child is immeasurable and this is compounded by the the lack of response when seeking help from others as I outlined above. It means my own experience of trying to share my story and seek assistance and being let down mirrors the type my daughter experienced in relation to her workplace bullying and mental health.

I believe workplace bullying and harassment needs to have adequate punishment and consequences and the mental health needs of those experiencing the bullying needs an adequate response to

1. Prevent suicide and self harm
2. Improve their mental health and well being
3. Enable the person to be able to re-enter the workforce, or receive training etc to participate in the workforce again
4. Place more responsibility and accountability on employers and recruitment agencies in terms of their "duty of care" to employees and to support those who are experiencing bullying including direct action
5. Support families who are also affected by the bullying of their family member, and for those that have lost their family member to suicide.

One of the items in the terms of reference is "contribute to improving mental health and economic participation and productivity" and I believe that one way of doing this is to highlight workplace bullying and harassment, the effect it has on mental health and economic participation and productivity and put into direct action ways to deal with this issue, so that no other family needs to experience what I and my family has.