

## GRIEVANCE DEBATE (Mental Health) – 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008

**Mrs VALE** (Hughes) (8:30 PM) —For many members in this place, the personal and social concerns of the families in our local communities take up the majority of our time and effort within our electorates. Such social issues become even more acute when our economy is not as strong and robust as it has been in the past, because it is those families at the lowest levels of our society who suffer the most. The ill and the infirm, the unemployed and the disadvantaged within our communities have no buffer against adversity and are the most vulnerable of our citizens. Like many members, I regularly meet with constituents to hear their concerns and try to assist them with their issues. From time to time there is one issue which keeps cropping up as the real dilemma for many of my constituents and which over the years seems to be getting worse rather than better—that is, the issue of how we look after and care for those fellow Australians who suffer from a mental illness.

Although the delivery services for the mentally ill is a matter for state governments, the reality is that we have an increasing number of Australians who are suffering from mental health issues and who are not getting the care, the support and the protection they need. Many are left homeless and unprotected by a health system that operates on the policy that simply provides mentally ill people with a prescription for their medication and a Centrelink payment on a regular basis. But providing prescriptions and Centrelink payments does not address their very real need for care, shelter, protection and appropriate supervision. In many cases, the families of mentally ill patients are at a loss to know how to properly care for them. Indeed, their families do not have the qualifications or the capacity to offer the constant professional support their mentally ill family member requires on a continual basis. Those that try often crumble under the weight of such relentless responsibility and, as a consequence, many mentally ill people are homeless and without shelter.

Recently in my electorate office I received a visit from a constituent, Ms Colleen O'Neill, whose older brother has suffered from a mental illness for many years and now appears to have been abandoned by the state health services and left in the too-hard basket. Ms O'Neill has since written an open letter expressing her concerns about her brother's situation for me to read to the parliament so that the very real issues that face families who have to deal with such a dilemma can hopefully be understood by the parliament and the members of this place. Ms O'Neill says:

I write this letter in particular to you Prime Minister Kevin Rudd as leader of our country and also Malcolm Turnbull (Leader of Opposition) because I think both of you are united in your belief of providing better conditions for our mentally ill and homeless people.

I have a brother who is a few years older than me and is now 49, he was diagnosed with Schizophrenia when he was approx. 21 years of age and sectioned at the time to Rozelle Psychiatric Hospital. A couple of years after that time, I travelled overseas and was abroad approx. 15 years. When I returned to Australia some 9 years ago I learnt my brother had been discharged from Rozelle Hospital and placed in a self contained unit through the community housing facility with periodic visits by medical staff regarding his condition, and the medication being taken.

As time went on, it became clear he was not able to manage on his own, as his medication was left to him to maintain and if he didn't want to open the door to medical teams he didn't, all of which ensured his decline. As a consequence, his home unit became flooded and derelict and eventually after family and State Housing intervention it was assessed as unsafe and he was evicted. While he was offered alternative accommodation at the time based on his previous dwelling, he felt he could not cope on his own and was not willing to take up this offer.

My brother decided he had no other option open to him at the time but to live in a local park. My parents are elderly and I am a single mother working full-time, and we are not in a position to look after him. The main message I get from him is that has no pressure and responsibility anymore, living in the park, and felt he could cope better. I understand this feeling of not coping is a part of his illness, but I fail to understand how the health system (which served him better some 25 years ago with the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter and medical staff) has somehow forgotten him and others like him.

Sydney had the Olympic Games in the year 2000, which I thought were fantastic for Australia. It showed the world what a great country Australia had become in the way of a modern multicultural society and thriving economy, embracing change and moving in the direction of embracing its history of the past through reconciliation. With all this progress being made, why have Australians

forgotten the mentally ill and the homeless, and why are we not striving to make their world a better place?

When a criminal goes to jail, they are provided with food, clothing and shelter. It may not be 5 star accommodation but nonetheless they are given the necessities which my brother and others like him are not. The mentally ill and the homeless are not criminals but why are they treated like social outcasts and worse than criminals?

Australia is concerned about climate change, which of course is of real concern to our existence, but we need to look also at what is happening now, what is real, what is right in the here and now.

My letter to both you gentlemen is to ask for something to be done collectively for these people to make their quality of life better. I suggest a Medical Village, similar to the model of a retirement village for the elderly, whereby there is a communal dining room; a lounge area; an activity area so they can do some sort of craft or woodwork; their own room so if they want to retire from people they can; and surrounding grounds for them to go for walks in a garden that will help them thrive to the best of their potential through a nurturing based environment.

Some of the money that my brother receives from Centrelink each fortnight goes to his GP and the Pharmacy for his medication and the rest he has to live on is for food. Knowing how expensive essentials are at the moment for normal householders, I don't know how he survives.

If there was a Medical Village for my brother, he wouldn't need Centrelink payments each fortnight, as food, clothing, shelter and medical necessities would all be at the village for him. In the long run the social cost to the country has to be offset by a better system set up to care for the mentally ill and centralized with these types of medical villages throughout the country. I understand that the state of New South Wales is hugely in deficit and that hospitals are greatly under resourced.

My brother has rights like you or me and whilst he is not in an ideal situation, unless he is hurting himself or someone else, he cannot be forced to leave the park where he is living to be placed in a better environment. We have to remember that he is mentally ill, so why is our health system not protecting him?

The thing I am asking the government to consider implementing is an amendment to legislation to give family members or medical staff the power to move people in my brother's situation to a better environment, but before this can happen the government needs to find a suitable model to care and protect people like my brother.

I work full-time and pay taxes like everyone else, and I want to see my taxes going towards a better future for people with a mental illness. I know how fragile life can be as I'm sure many Australians do, so when members of parliament are privileged enough to work in a position where they can bring about change for the better, they should try to make a difference for people like my brother and for all the people in Australia who suffer from a mental illness and are homeless, which is what I am trying to do: make a difference.

Thank you for your time in listening to this letter.

Yours truly

Colleen O'Neill.

I think we can all identify with the distress of Mrs O'Neill and her parents about the situation of her brother and, particularly, that there appears to be nothing the current system allows her to do to assist him. Once upon a time, shelter, protection and care were provided to people suffering from a mental illness. But, with the advent of the Richmond report back in the 1980s, state government health departments were in an inordinate rush to close down such places and send vulnerable patients forth into the world armed with a prescription for their medication and a fortnightly welfare support payment as the only tools for a precarious survival. While many former institutions were not operated appropriately, and many did have an adverse impact on many people, the current situation of indifference and abject neglect is also just as morally untenable in a wealthy nation like Australia.

While we may be going through a tough economic time, those Australians with a mental illness who are homeless deserve much better from the lucky country. I urge this government and all members on both sides of the House to address this issue. The solutions are there. They just take

commitment and the political will to deliver, and I do believe there are many politicians, many parliamentary representatives on both sides of the House, who actually have that commitment and that political will.