

Media Release

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Debate rages over Baume Report, 'Tracking Tragedy'.

Released just prior to Christmas the Report is the result of work by the Sentinel Events Review Committee set up in May 2002 by NSW Health. The Committee was set up to review suicides and homicides involving people who have a mental illness.

The Report is currently being debated by interest groups within a 'rights' framework. On the one hand there are those who condemn the report on the grounds that it impinges civil rights, by broadening the criteria under which people can be maintained against their will or 'locked up'. On the other hand there are those who argue it supports the right of people with mental illness to receive treatment, increasing the ability of mental health services to protect individuals from doing harm to themselves or others.

The Mental Health Co-ordinating Council (MHCC), which has consumer, carer and service provider organizations within its membership wants the debate to focus on treatment, care and follow up options for people coming into contact with mental health services. "Rhetoric about the 'right to treatment' means little if the treatment on offer is minimal and in some instances detrimental to consumers forced to reside in mental health facilities which are poorly designed for their purpose, understaffed both in terms of numbers and expertise, with little ability to provide a healing recovery focused environment." Stated MHCC Executive Officer Ms Jenna Bateman

'Mental health treatment has been increasingly focused on drug therapy and neglectful of the range of holistic therapies that attempt to address strategies for people to better understand and manage their illness. The value of caring, communication and support have suffered from the squeezing of resources and the dominance of the biomedical model which values the prescription of medication above all other interventions and treatment options'.

'The Carr government must recognise the shortcomings in the resource base for mental health service provision in NSW. It lags behind other states and particularly in the amount dedicated to interventions other than drug treatment. Community based services which provide holistic services focusing on illness education and support, accommodation, occupation and issues of social isolation and community participation prevent relapse and provide clinical services with referral points to assist those who present needing help. These services in NSW are funded way below the national average at only 3% of mental health spending'.

'The Baum report is saying little that is new. Many of its recommendations are already in place. All the policies in the world will not fix a system that requires a complete re focus not some tinkering at the edges which will ultimately mean more paperwork for already overburdened clinicians'.

'The Carr government in standing behind the recommendations within the Baume Report must be careful not to undo the gains made in reducing discrimination against people with mental illness by capitulating to those who would make the management of people with mental illness a law and order issue. Despite over representation in the media only 10% of all homicides are committed by someone with a mental illness.'

'People need access to a range of treatment options when they present requesting help. The experience of carers needs to be considered. Close supervision and a safe supportive environment are equally important to medication and comprehensive planning for discharge and ongoing support in the community give people hope that recovery is possible. The Baume Report is not articulate on the importance of care but rather takes the purely clinical approach that maintaining people until the medication works is enough. It's not.'

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