

Revolutionary Change Recommended By Mental Health Inquiry

The *Inquiry into mental health Services in New South Wales – Final Report* by the Select Committee on Mental Health was tabled in Parliament on Friday 6 December 2002. As mandated by the terms of reference of the inquiry, the report is a comprehensive analysis of the current state of NSW mental health services and service delivery, with a particular focus on changes that have occurred since the adoption of the Richmond Report in 1983. The recommendations made by the Select Committee clearly identify the need for revolutionary change and a whole of government, NGO and community approach within the mental health sector. The report is based on evidence received from 303 submissions and 91 witnesses. Chair of the Committee, The Hon Dr Brian Pezzutti MLC, held a press conference on 9 December 2002 at which he outlined some of the key recommendations of the report. Confirming what NGOs in the sector have been saying for some time, Dr Pezzutti commented that: 'It's almost 20 years since the Richmond Report and the community sector is still yet to see the resources they were promised.'

At the press conference, Dr Pezzutti highlighted recommendations relating to the need for an increased number of medium- to long-term psychiatric beds, specialized facilities for forensic patients outside of prisons and greater recognition of mental health nurses. He argued that the trend towards de-institutionalisation, in conjunction with inadequate provision to the community sector and service gaps has resulted in the institutionalisation of homelessness and inappropriate incarceration of mental health consumers. The Committee proposes that Rozelle Hospital be established as an asylum for consumers with acute mental health problems, providing medium- to long-term rehabilitation services. However, the Hon Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans MLC expressed concern that debate regarding the reports recommendations should not be sidetracked by debate over the appropriate use for Callan Park. Dr Pezzutti emphasized the need for a secure forensic mental health facility in NSW, modeled on the Thomas Embling Hospital in Victoria. He pointed out that NSW is the only mainland state in Australia and one of few in Western democratic countries to incarcerate forensic patients. The report recommends the establishment of a State Institute of Forensic Science to co-ordinate forensic mental health facilities and services such as the court liaison service, court reports and psychiatric services. Finally, Dr Pezzutti identified the shortage of mental health nurses in NSW as a significant problem. To address this issue, the report recommends the development of further career opportunities for nurses including the priority appointment of Nurse Practitioners. The Committee also recognizes that radical improvements in facilities and services, such as those proposed in the report will increase job satisfaction and encourage more nurses (back) into the mental health sector.

The report provides long-overdue recognition of both NGOs and carers and the value of their role in the continuum of care. Key recommendations of the report, include the establishment of an Office of Mental Health in the NSW Premier's Department. It is envisaged that an Office of Mental Health would play a vital role in providing a coordinated approach to mental health services and service delivery in NSW between various government departments, NGOs and community service providers. In recognition of the low proportion of total mental health expenditure allocated to NGOs in NSW, identified in submissions from MHCC and NCOSS, the report proposes NSW Health increase and better target funding to NGOs. To facilitate this, the report recommends improved accountability and transparency in relation to mental health funds allocated to and expended by Area Health Services and that the Centre for Mental Health determine the funding allocation for statewide programs run by NGOs. The report proposes that the Minister for Health ensure additional resources are made available for adequate case management of mental health consumers in the community. Furthermore, that the number of supported accommodation places is increased by 1,000 over the next two years. Again adopting a recommendation from MHCC's submission, the Committee also proposes that the Minister for Health ensure carers are assessed for their capacity to support consumers, are included in the planning of care programs and assisted to access support for themselves.

Comprehensive and worthwhile recommendations are also made in the areas of suicide prevention, improved provisions for dealing with dual diagnosis, privacy and homelessness and in relation to specific target groups including people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, the elderly and youth. MHCC will be looking to the Government to implement immediately many of the recommendations made in the report and begin to work in a more consultative manner with consumers, carers and service providers to radically improve the mental health system in NSW.

To obtain a copy of the report contact the Select Committee on Mental Health or download from the parliamentary website:
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