



*Working For  
Mental Health*

14<sup>th</sup> January, 2005

Mr Steve Morris  
Senior Policy Officer  
Mental Health Council of Australia

Mental Health  
Co-ordinating Council

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Dear Mr Morris

Thank you for providing the Mental Health Co-ordinating Council (MHCC) with the opportunity to contribute to the submission of the Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA) to the Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria in relation to the issue of women only psychiatric wards.

MHCC is the state peak body for non-government organisations (NGOs) working for mental health throughout NSW. MHCC represents the views and interests of over 140 NGOs in the formation of policy and acts as a liaison between the government and non-government sectors. Our member organisations specialise in the provision of services and support for people with a disability due to mental illness.

MHCC has serious concerns in relation to the safety and well-being of women in mixed gender psychiatric wards. We are concerned about a variety of risks including the following: the risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault; the risk of "consensual" sexual activity, which is not genuinely consensual as the person is unable to provide informed consent due to acute mental illness or the sedating effect of medication; the increased risk to the person's mental and physical health as a result of the harassment and assault, including the risk of sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy and post traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to the above risks experienced by women, MHCC is also concerned about the confronting and intimidating nature of many psychiatric inpatient units generally, including the intimidation and harassment that frequently occurs in relation to cigarettes and money.

Another area of concern is the lack of separation of young, physically strong, frequently hyperactive males with psychosis from frail, elderly patients who are being treated for anxiety and/or depression. This type of environment is very unsafe for elderly people who are at serious risk of being bumped, pushed or hit, resulting in physical and psychological injury, including exacerbation of existing anxiety and depression.

MHCC supports the use of service delivery standards and agrees that they have a role to play in addressing and managing risks. The performance of health services in identifying risks to patients and ensuring their protection should be part of performance review and accreditation.

MHCC is not aware of any plans for separate gender psychiatric inpatient facilities. We do not feel that this is necessary for women in general or for women from specific cultures. MHCC is supportive of culturally sensitive mental health services, however we feel that safe and culturally sensitive services can be achieved without the provision of completely separate services.

We support the MHCA's concerns that funding separate services for males and females could draw funding away from areas of greater need such as the following: insufficient community support for people with mental illness; workforce shortages; difficulties in accessing services; insufficient accommodation; inappropriate early discharge; inadequate mental illness prevention and rehabilitation programs; and the gross inadequacy of appropriate services for people with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse.

MHCC's view is that there should be completely separate areas, which include sleeping and bathroom quarters, for males and females in mental health units, but that there should also be common areas, such as dining and recreation areas, where men and women can mix. These are areas where observation by staff is high and unwanted incidents can be prevented.

MHCC supports the assignment a staff member of the same gender as the patient where necessary. In addition MHCC would like to see the implementation of increased education and training for staff in the areas of patient safety and cultural sensitivity.

Thank you for seeking our involvement in this important area. MHCC would be happy to review any proposed guidelines or training for staff in this area. If you would like to discuss any issues surrounding this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Ann MacLochlainn or myself at MHCC on (02) 9 555 8388.

Yours sincerely

Jenna Bateman  
Executive Officer  
Mental Health Co-ordinating Council.