

## STATEMENT OF JOAN BELLINGHAM

### 1 Introduction

1.1 My name is Joan Bellingham. I was born on 7 August 1952 and I am 67 years old. I was born in Christchurch at St George's Hospital, and have been based in Christchurch all of my life.

1.2 I would describe my family as a very close-knit family with a history in health care. Both my mother and grandmother were nurses. My sister was also a nurse at Princess Margaret Hospital in Christchurch but is now retired.

1.3 In this statement I wish to talk about what happened to me while I was in training at Burwood, and the abuse I suffered as a patient at Prince Margaret Hospital. I also want to talk about the long-term effects on me, and my experience in seeking redress for what happened. The uncertainty associated with seeking redress was almost as bad as the original abuse. My hope is that no one has to go through what I went through.

1.4 I also want to acknowledge my friend, Margaret O'Connell for being a real support and strength to me on this for many years. So much of what I have gone through would not have been possible with her by my side.

### 2 Training at Burwood Hospital

2.1 When I was 13, I attended Cashmere High School in Christchurch. When I finished high school at approximately 18 years of age, I left home to train to be a nurse at Burwood Hospital. I commenced training on 6 April 1970. I

always wanted to be a nurse and always thought that was my calling in life.

- 2.2 At Burwood I was enrolled in a nursing course that was meant to take three years. I remained a student at Burwood for at least several months before I was admitted to Princess Margaret Hospital. I was happy there to start with. I loved my nursing and had a lot of friends. We used to go out and socialise, which was sometimes frowned upon by training staff.
- 2.3 Many things that are socially acceptable now were not in the 70s. Sexuality wasn't often talked about publicly. I myself have always been pretty open about my sexuality. I have been gay for as long as I can remember. I never saw it as something that I needed to hide away.
- 2.4 While I was at Burwood word got around that I was gay. I was constantly picked on, especially by training staff at Burwood. The matron in particular took real offence to my being gay. She constantly made snide comments about it. I recall one day in particular the matron stared straight at me and told me that homosexuality was wrong. It was the first time I had experienced prejudice so openly and directly. She would write comments on my grade papers saying that 'if you thought that you are going to be a nurse you are wrong'. I can remember feeling terribly ashamed.
- 2.5 As the months passed by, my time at Burwood became more and more difficult. I believe to the staff I was perceived as 'not conforming'. At one stage I came into class late at 10.00am, which raised eyebrows.
- 2.6 Things came to a head when on one occasion accused by the same matron of stealing drugs off a trolley. This was

totally false. It was after this incident that things really escalated. I was told that I needed treatment and was taken to Princess Margaret Hospital, that same day. I didn't have my clothes with me or anything. There was no choice in the matter. I was just told that I was being admitted to Princess Margaret. I didn't realise it at the time, but I would spend the next 12 or so years as a patient there and would never get to complete my nurse training.

### **3 Princess Margaret Hospital**

- 3.1 I can remember being driven to a psychiatric ward. I was admitted on or about 21 December 1970. I cannot myself recall the exact dates but understand I was discharged on 8 January 1971.
- 3.2 During this short period all I remember is that I was terrified and told them that this was a mistake, but they wouldn't listen. They gave me drugs to quieten me down. I recall my mother also being deeply anxious I was in hospital and wanted to know why I needed to be there. But you didn't question the doctor's authority during those times. They were like gods. They thought I might have 'neurotic personality disorder'. The worst part is that I never felt like I was given a genuine choice, or that the doctor was listening to me.
- 3.3 When I was discharged I would try and function as normal. I would stay with my parents. I cannot remember much of what would happen after I was discharged.
- 3.4 I would be in and out of hospital for the next 15 years. Sometimes it would be for short periods of time, maybe a week or so. For example I was admitted again from 23 April

1971 to 4 May 1971, then again from 14 May to 17 May 1971. All up I was admitted 24 separate times to Princess Margaret from 21 December 1970 to 28 June 1982. I become so used to the hospital it became a part of me. When they told me to go home, sometimes I feel like I didn't want to go. By the end of my time as a patient, I had become institutionalised.

#### **4 Treatment and effects**

- 4.1 As the frequency of visits increased, time blurred and I felt like I had no will to live. I made numerous complaints to the doctors about this, as I believed this was due to the antipsychotic medication I was constantly being given. The amount of medication was astounding. They never explained what it was or what it was for. They also never talked about the side effects. I was just told to 'take it'.
- 4.2 The medication was also excessive. For example, my medical notes say that on 31 May 1977 I had 6 mcmol per litre of chlorpromazine in my blood when the therapeutic range was 1.6 to 2.2 mcmol per litre.
- 4.3 They also performed electroconvulsive therapy on me. I believe that this was over 200 times during the course of the 12 years. A review of my medical notes indicates that I was prescribed ECT daily between 21 to 31 December 1973, on 2, 4, 9, 11, 15, 18, 22, 24 and 26 January 1974, the 1, 5, 8, 12, 15, 19 and 26 February, 29, 30 and 31 July, 1, 7 and 9 August 1974, on several occasions in or about June 1976, 2, 6 to 10, 12, 19 and 20 July 1976, 23, 25, 26 and 27 and on other days in April 1977, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 17, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27 and 30 May, 2, 7, 9, 21, 24, 27 and 30 June 1977, 18, 19, 20 and 25 April 1979, 19, 21, 23 and 28 July

and 2 August 1982 and I believe several other occasions. A letter from the house physician dated 18 June 1979 says that I had 100 doses of ECT since April 1977.

- 4.4 There was no regular pattern to ETS. Sometimes it would happen twice a day, once a day or once every few days. You would be told the night before that you would have shock treatment the next day and not to have anything to eat.
- 4.5 They would give me a muscle relaxant to paralyse me. It felt like razor blades going through my body. You were fully awake during this time. You could see the silver machine and the assistants holding the electrodes. They would place the electrodes around my head before I became unconscious.
- 4.6 Every time after shock therapy I felt faint, dizzy and vomited. I felt terrible. I would vomit and cry and often beg them not to do it again. They would not listen or respond.
- 4.7 Sometimes it caused me to become completely blind for a period of time. I complained to the doctor about this on 22 December 1973 and still suffered from loss of vision the following day. It came back gradually.
- 4.8 Some of the experiences were horrible. I remember one time I was put into a room with nothing in there and needed to go to the toilet at night. There were no bells, nothing at all in the room. I was given a large amount of drugs and I couldn't walk. I couldn't make it to the toilet so I peed on the floor for which I was punished. I was like a walking zombie.
- 4.9 On one occasion I complained about being in a room with nothing around me. The room had windows and there was

a bed and sheets, one blanket and a locker. I was given trial drugs for deep sleep therapy, which lasted about a week. I remember I had to ring a bell to go to the bathroom. I felt so humiliated. It felt like I had no reason to live. I hated myself.

- 4.10 As a result of the frequency of ECT I ended up with seeping electrode burns on my scalp. This became one of the grounds for my ACC claim. Hairdressers sometimes comment on my head burns.
- 4.11 I was often given enemas of soap and water as a punishment. On one occasion I tried to jump in a river because of the drugs. I got severely reprimanded for the carpet being wet and was given an enema.
- 4.12 Perhaps the most damaging effect it has had on me is my loss of memory. This has been accepted as true in a psychiatric report in a letter dated 9 September 1993 by L Ding.<sup>1</sup> I cannot remember anything about key events in my life, particularly during my 20s. I often find I cannot remember old friends. I also have tinnitus and severe headaches, which I believe is a result of the treatment I suffered at Princess Margaret.
- 4.13 I can recall the doctor who treated me. I would see him once or twice a week. He would ask me all sorts of questions about being a lesbian. He would ask me questions like 'how many times a week do you have sex with your partner', and 'what is it like'. I would become very scared and would not want to be left in the room alone with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix B. 'Psychiatric Report dated 9 September 1993'.

- 4.14 As I became institutionalised, I would ask for ECT and they would give it to me. I ended up hating myself so much. It was a form of self-loathing which I believe was caused by the medication I was given.
- 4.15 I felt terrible being labelled an alcoholic, a schizophrenic and a drug addict. I did take some drugs recreationally while I was a student, but was never an addict. These things were not true. I eventually got all three of these things wiped off my records.
- 4.16 There was never any follow up from the hospital despite years and years of treatment.
- 4.17 Subsequently, in 2000 I was diagnosed with hepatitis C. I had initially thought this was caused by my dentist. However it is at least possible this was contracted during my time at Princess Margaret and likely through the electrodes used during ECT. I believe that Princess Margaret did not use disposable electrodes between 1975 to 1980.<sup>2</sup> Bill Jang, a counsellor and support worker at the Hepatitis C Resource Centre, advocated for me and wrote a letter on or around 2 October 2008 in support of my claim, which is included in my bundle of documents.<sup>3</sup>

## **5 Complaints**

- 5.1 During my treatment at Princess Margaret, I remember making several complaints to individual doctors. I wasn't sure at the time if they were 'official' complaints. I was never even sure whether we as patients could make an 'official' complaint. No one ever listened.

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix A at pages 5 and 6. 'Application for Review of ACC decision'.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix A at page 89. 'Application for Review of ACC decision'.

- 5.2 I complained when I felt scared. I always complained before ECT. I complained about my memory loss. The doctor would always call me 'girl'. He would say 'no need to worry girl, it will come back'. I would tell my parents, but they never questioned authority. My memory got blurrier and blurrier. It felt like I would never be believed.
- 5.3 I also remember making complaints about the burns to my scalp. I made a complaint to the same doctor who called me 'girl'. He said to me that it was 'unfortunate' but that 'it does happen on occasion'. The burns got worse and I still have scarring. As noted above, sometimes hairdressers comment on them.
- 5.4 I remember it was always frustrating to be in an institution trying to get treatment and never being believed. It felt incredibly isolating.

## **6 My claims**

- 6.1 Over the years I tried numerous ways to get recognition and redress. It felt like no one would listen to me or believe what happened to me.
- 6.2 My lawyer was initially from Johnston Lawrence. He filed a statement of claim dated Thursday 13 January 2005,<sup>4</sup> but these proceedings never went anywhere because as far as I can recall the Crown relied on the Limitation Act defence.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately I do not have a complete record of the Court documents.
- 6.3 I complained to my local MP for Wigram, John Anderton. He helped me a lot. He wrote a letter to the Associate Minister

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix C. 'Statement of Claim'.

<sup>5</sup> Appendix D. 'Notice of Opposition'.



of Health Jonathan Coleman, pointing out that I had spent all of my inheritance money on expensive lawyers fees, and telling him how cruel it was to make survivors undergo the trauma of court cases. Mr Anderton also wrote to former Minister of Justice Simon Power and Attorney General Chris Finlayson. Unfortunately I only have a copy of the letter to the former Attorney General available.<sup>6</sup>

- 6.4 I also had to get support from my doctor of 25 years, Dr Michael Glen. He wrote a letter dated 25 August 2010 on my behalf about the excessive treatment I received at Princess Margaret.<sup>7</sup> His letter notes that my life would have been very different if not for that treatment.
- 6.5 I think it is incredibly disappointing that survivors need to rely on local MPs and doctors to speak up on their behalf. There is no publicly available information on how one can make a claim, or clear processes for doing so. There was also no real support in terms of funding for expensive lawyers for people like me. I do acknowledge that I received some Crown funded counselling, which did help.
- 6.6 It felt to me like these letters were getting nowhere. I never got any kind of meaningful response to any of them.
- 6.7 The only progress was made when the Crown Health Funding Agency process occurred. I put in my claim which was assessed. On 27 January 2012, after so many years of trying to get recognition, I received a letter from Crown Law setting out the terms of the settlement offer.<sup>8</sup> Those terms gave me a 'wellness payment' of \$4,000.00, a small contribution of \$4,250 to my legal costs (which were in

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix E. 'Letter to Attorney General from Jim Anderton MP'.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix F. 'Letter to Attorney General from Dr Michael Glen'.

<sup>8</sup> Appendix G. 'Letter from Crown Law to Grant Cameron'.

reality much more than that), and an apology.<sup>9</sup> But there was no admission of liability by the Crown. Also we were required to keep the settlement confidential, so had no way of comparing quantum with other claimants.

6.8 The settlement was also very uncertain for me. I received advice from my lawyer saying the 'wellness payment' might have tax implications which could not be ruled out.<sup>10</sup> Also, because of my ACC claim, I was told that my wellness payment might need to be paid back to the Crown because my ACC payments might have already compensated me for those damages. It was totally disillusioning. How could the Crown pay us compensation only to take it back again? There was no certainty for me as a survivor of my settlement.

6.9 Also I felt very pressured to accept the offer, even though to me it was a paltry sum of money. The reason is because there were no other options available. I heard the Crown would just hide behind the fact that the claims happened so long ago to escape any liability and to prevent us from having our stories heard and recognised.

## **7 ACC**

7.1 I made a claim to ACC for personal injury related to by scalp burns in 1987. I was finally given some compensation (\$10,000 for burns, \$1,500 for chronic headaches) in 1999.

7.2 for burns I suffered to my scalp. It was all done through a lawyer. I had to get photographs of my scalp. I can remember ACC said that they couldn't believe I had burns

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<sup>9</sup> Appendix H. 'Letter of Apology from the Crown Health Financing Agency'.

<sup>10</sup> Appendix I. 'Letter to Joan Bellingham from CGA Lawyers'.

to my scalp caused by the electrodes. They said that it could have been cigarette burns.

- 7.3 I made claims related to my hepatitis C diagnosis. I got support to confirm that it was possible that I contracted hepatitis C in my time at Princess Margaret. My claim was ultimately denied.<sup>11</sup> It felt like ACC never took the claim seriously. The officials at ACC were constantly questioning whether what happened was true. They constantly sought to deny my claims and I had to get numerous decisions reviewed over the course of years. I have included documentation related to my ACC claim as evidence.

## 8 Conclusion

- 8.1 The process of redress was difficult. There was never any clarity or certainty. There was also never any support through the process. I constantly felt like I was battling up hill to get people to recognise me or believe what I was saying actually happened.
- 8.2 There needs to be a clear process in place with financial resources and other support for those who have a legitimate claim, in terms of toll that the process has on family welfare and mental health. Having this would have alleviated a great deal of personal stress.

Signed



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Date: 25 February 2020

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<sup>11</sup> Appendix A, page 2. 'Application for Review of ACC decision'.