

**Witness Name:** CHARLES MAURICE SYMES

**Statement No:** WITN0302001

**Exhibits:** WITN0302002 – WITN0302008

**Dated:** 21 March 2021

**ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF CHARLIE MAURICE SYMES**

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I, Charlie Maurice Symes, will say as follows: –

- 1 My name is Charlie Maurice Symes. I live in Wanganui. I was born on GRO-C 1958, and I am the third to youngest out of 12 children. I am a survivor of Lake Alice.
- 2 My early years at home were not good. My father was not home much. My mother was very violent, and I learnt to be physical and to fight from an early age. My mum, led mostly by Social Welfare, ended up putting me into state care from a very young age because she could not control me.
- 3 I was sent to Hokio, Epuni, and Kohitere and had a horrible time in all those institutions. I was an angry boy and would act out quiet a bit. I would run away a lot and was sent to psychiatrists for them to try and help me. There are a number of psychiatrist reports on me that mentioned stuff like I was depressed,

I had self-destructive thoughts, I was nervous, anxious, miserable, and self-loathing. The most recent before my admission to Lake Alice was on 10 April 1973 (J A Codd, Department of Child Welfare, Psychological Service Report dated 10 April 1973 [WITN0302002]). I agree that this is how I was feeling at the time. But this was mostly because of the environment I was being brought up in. I even attempted to take my own life. I just wanted to get away.

- 4 Leeks was one of the main doctors at the time down there, so I saw him when I was at the boys' schools. This was before I was admitted to Lake Alice. When I first met him, I thought he was a kind man – that's how he came across. But that changed very quickly.

#### **Admission to Lake Alice**

- 5 I had two stays in Lake Alice. The first was for six weeks and the second for a year. I was committed for the first time on 4 October 1973 (Dr. Pugmire, Lake Alice Admission and Discharge Note dated 18 November 1973 [WITN0302003]). I was diagnosed with “hysterical character disorder”. Social Welfare put me there, not my parents. I was 15 years old. I was put into Villa 11. I was discharged on 18 November 1973.
- 6 I was committed to Lake Alice for the second time on 1 October 1974 because of a knife incident (G P S Fernando, Lake Alice Admission Note dated 1 October 1974 [WITN0302004]). Apparently, I pulled a knife on my flatmates, but to be honest, I can't really remember much about this.
- 7 I think it was Ward 4 that I was put into first (I'm not too sure on the numbers), and then later into Ward 8, which is the security ward and a ward that they would put you in to punish you. I think they transferred me over to Ward 8 because I was too hard to deal with. I was physically violent and would rebel against them and lash out a lot.
- 8 I was discharged for the second time on 30 October 1975 after spending almost a year in there. I was not put in Lake Alice because of any mental issues and still think I should not have been sent there. Leeks himself said in a report to the Magistrates Court in 1976 that I had no mental disorder. When I obtained

my medical and nursing notes, there are no records of any of the drugs or ECT that I was given (Doctor and Nurses Notes mentioning violent outbursts, various dates between 1974 - 1975 [WITN0302007]).

## ECT

- 9 I received ECT for the first time after only being in Lake Alice for a few days.
- 10 I had ECT two to three times a week. It was always without anaesthetic. ECT was always used as a punishment. It was always Leeks who gave me ECT. There would be other nurses there too, big men who would pin me down to the table and pull belts over my chest, waist, and legs.
- 11 Whenever they tried to strap me down like this on the table, I would always lash out and try to fight it. I would hear the ECT machine warming up, it would make this humming sound that I can still remember today. Once the humming stopped, it meant the machine was ready and the pain started.
- 12 I got shock treatment on my head, on my groin, on the soles of my feet, on my neck, and across my chest – anywhere Leeks wanted to put the shock pads really. It was always in the most sensitive places. I received most of the shock treatments without any anaesthetic. We all did.
- 13 The usual treatments would last between five to ten minutes, but if Dr Leeks wanted to be really mean, the ECT would last longer and longer. He really did enjoy it. The longest session I had was about 45 minutes. I remember Leeks's face when he would turn the knob; he smiled every time, and his smile would get broader and broader the more pain he caused.
- 14 When he finished shocking us, we were wheeled back into our wards, they would unbuckle the straps that were holding us down, and roll us off on to our beds. We were just flicked off like we were rag dolls. It would take about five to six hours to come out of it. This was whether we received anaesthetic or not because the ECT would knock you out either way.

- 15 I also had ECT on my genitals. I still have the burn marks from it. I believe this is the reason why I've never been able to have children. I had two wives and neither of them could have children.
- 16 Lots of the kids got ECT. There was a day room filled with boys and girls where we waited to find out if we were going to get ECT. Everyone was terrified. We never received shock treatment together. Leeks liked to keep us separated. But you could hear the screams of the kids when they were getting ECT. There was a group of us kids that would get together and talk about what would happen to us when we went into the shock treatment room. The youngest one was only about seven or eight. The nurses would pull us apart if they saw us talking together.
- 17 We would try to protect ourselves by hiding each other when they would come to get us for punishment. But it only made things worse. I remember them taking one of the girls in our group, and when she came back, she had burns on her legs.
- 18 I was told that I received ECT to stop my violent outbursts, but every time I got ECT it just made my anger worse. I got more and more violent. I hated it.
- 19 The worst time was when someone grabbed me from behind in the day room to take me to ECT. I started fighting furiously not realising it was Dr Leeks. I broke his nose in three places.
- 20 I got a hammering from ECT after that. I got ECT for six days in a row, and each time it was harder and harder. I was then put in security for three weeks. People saw that happen. When I got back to the ward after being in security all that time, the other kids swamped me wanting to know what had happened. I was a bit of a hero for having broken Dr Leeks's nose.
- 21 One time, I had to be taken to Wanganui Hospital after receiving shock treatment because I was having heart and breathing problems. I had to be put on a respirator and stayed in hospital for about one and a half weeks.

- 22 In 1996, I had a heart valve replacement. I have a titanium valve and now have to take warfarin regularly for the rest of my life. The surgeon told me that I should never have had ECT because I had a hole in my heart. He said I was lucky to be alive having been given ECT at that age.

### **Solitary confinement/security**

- 23 I spent most of my time in Ward 8 which was the security ward. I ended up in there because I kept knocking over staff and being violent. I didn't mind being in isolation; it gave me time to reflect.
- 24 It was much different in Ward 8 than in Ward 4 or any others wards that I saw. We weren't given the chance to shower and wash frequently. One time, I went without showering for three months. Every time I went to shower, they would turn me around to go back or send me off to breakfast without showering.
- 25 I never went to school or received any type of schooling when I was in Lake Alice.

### **Sexual Abuse**

- 26 Me and a number of other boys were sexually abused in the night by one of the staff. About three or four hours after we were sent to bed, they used to come around to "check on us", but instead of just checking on us, they would play with us.
- 27 I remember waking up one night and one of the male nurses was standing over me and his hand was going down the waistline of my pants. I tried to yell but he put his hand over my mouth to stop me making a sound. I don't remember his name, but he was Caucasian, in his mid-20s and had a very soft-spoken voice. It was like he was trying to put me back to sleep when he spoke. He wore a Rolex watch. I knew there was no point in complaining about this because no one would believe us. They would just call us liars. And they did.
- 28 This went on for about a year.

- 29 Another time, I heard that Dr Leeks's pet nurse was trying it on with one of the girls. The nurse was 20 years older than the young woman. When we heard about this, we waited for him one night and attacked him. I was sent back to security then.

### **Escaping**

- 30 I escaped more than twice. One of the times was to see my father, who was in Wanganui Hospital. I asked Leeks if I could go and visit him, but Leeks refused to let me, so I jumped out the window. They found me about a week later and took me back to Lake Alice. I wasn't allowed food or drink and was punished in the usual way, ECT.
- 31 One of the nurses called me "the escape artist". That is why I ended up in the maximum security, which meant you were only allowed outside for less than an hour a day. But that didn't really bother me. I got so used to being inside. Lake Alice made sure of that; it was like being in prison. I guess it got me ready for the time that I would go to prison as an adult.
- 32 It made it hard to be on the outside though. Lake Alice made me a loner. Having people in my life just makes everything harder, and I often push people away because I prefer to be alone.

### **Drugs**

- 33 My medical notes say I received phenothiazine, largactil, stelazine, and melleril when I was at Lake Alice. Most of these drugs were used to knock us around and make us dummies.
- 34 Some of these were by injection, but most of them were standard tablets. If we didn't take them, they forced them down us. We would be given drugs every day. Back then, I was just too angry, and the drugs heightened that. There were some that were supposed to work as a relaxant, but they had the opposite effect on me. There were a few of the other kids that were like me, and we would get more worked up. But most of them would just blob out.

35 I remember getting a drug that I think was paraldehyde. It made me wild and hyper, and I would smell bad for about a week after.

36 Once again, one of the worst things for me about getting these drugs was the fact that I had a heart problem and should not have been given these at all at my age. I'm lucky to have survived Lake Alice and to still be alive today.

### **Staff**

37 I only remember Leeks's name. But when I was first introduced to him, he was called "the doctor". I don't remember the names of the other staff members.

38 A lot of the staff were good but not the ones who would hold us down while Dr Leeks strapped us on the bench for ECT. Sometimes there were eight staff holding you down. We hated them, especially one nurse who was very violent with us as he dragged us to the room.

### **Residents**

39 There was a lot of physical violence between the boys. I was very fit. I had a mean violent streak in me then. Going to Lake Alice just made me worse.

### **Discrimination**

40 When I was in Ward 8, I tried to hang out with the Māori boys more. We were the minority in Ward 8, and we had to try and find a way to survive. Coming together when we could was one way. We still fought among each other, but at least we were together.

41 I believe that Māori were treated a lot worse than other boys. We had way more ECT than the others. We were the minority, but we still received the most punishment.

### **Getting out of Lake Alice**

42 The only way I got out of Lake Alice was because I knew that they did not like gays. Me and another boy got into bed together and were mucking around with each other so the staff could see. When one walked in and caught us, we were

both kicked out and just dumped outside of the fence. I was around 17 at the time. We had to walk all the way back to Wanganui.

- 43 Being gay was unheard of then, and they didn't want me sticking around. That was my way of getting out of there. My discharge note makes no mention of this (Dr. Pugmire, Lake Alice Discharge Note dated 30 October 1975 [WITN0302005]). Later the Wanganui Magistrates Court asked for a report on me, and Dr Leeks wrote that I had "no mental disorder within the meaning of the Crimes Act" (Dr Leeks, Letter to the Wanganui Magistrate Court, dated 14 May 1976 [WITN0302006]).

### **Making a complaint**

- 44 I was 20 years old when I first tried to make a complaint about what happened to me in Lake Alice. The Citizens Commission on Human Rights had contacted me to make a statement. I wrote what happened to me. (C Symes, Statement Accompanying Police Complaint, dated 20 September 1978 [WITN0302008]). I prepared the statement myself from what I could remember. I also used a diary that I kept while I was in Lake Alice to jog my memory about the detail. I had to hide this diary from the staff so they wouldn't take it away. I took it with me when I left but don't know where it is now.
- 45 I took the statement into the Wanganui Police Station and also sent a copy of this in the mail to the Ministry of Health, but they put it on the shelf and forgot it. After that, I turned off the memories of Lake Alice because there were too many bad memories. I just wanted to block them out. I was very glad that chapter of my life was closed.
- 46 I received \$42,000 in the Grant Cameron pay-out for pain and suffering. I don't know if I was in the first or second group, but I know that I only received one payment. That money was not enough.
- 47 A few months ago, the police came to visit me and asked me to go to the Wanganui Police Station and give a statement about Lake Alice. I did, but I told them that it had taken them 40 years to get their arse into gear and decide to take him seriously.



**Effect of Lake Alice**

- 48 ECT has affected my short-term memory, and I don't think it is as good as it could have been. While I can remember my time in Lake Alice (how could I forget), I can't remember things such as appointments or if I have done something or said something. I also developed a really bad anger problem.
- 49 There have been a number of times throughout my life where I have thought about cutting my wrists, but then I thought better of it. I didn't want to let them win.
- 50 I have issues with social situations and don't really have much respect for authority.
- 51 Perhaps the biggest effect though has been my ongoing heart problems and the fact that I don't think I can have kids. This was because of the ECT I received at Lake Alice.
- 52 It has taken the Ministry of Health 35 years to help me with my heart problems, even though this was picked up way back when I was at Lake Alice.
- 53 I use fishing to calm me down. It is a relaxant and helps me to forget the horrible things I went through – for a little while anyway, as you can tell.

**What I want from the Commission**

- 54 I think Selwyn Leeks should be charged. If they brought him back, I'd be the first in the courthouse. Something needs to happen to him. It's just not right.
- 55 I want proper compensation for what happened to me. The compensation I received is nowhere near enough for 50 years for pain and suffering. In my opinion, they can do a lot better. I have sent an email directly to the ministry telling them what they paid me out and that it's not right. I haven't got a reply back yet.
- 56 I received an apology letter from the ministry, but I still don't think that's good enough for everything that happened. I want a public apology, so everyone in New Zealand knows what we went through. No one knew what was happening

to us at that time, and some actually turned a blind eye so they didn't have to face what was happening to us. People need to know that.

57 Ultimately, I want some responsibility taken from the Ministry of Health and for them to recognise that it is their systems that caused all of this. The mental health system needs a change in Aotearoa – it needs to be overhauled so that this never happens again. Same with their compensation processes.

58 Lastly, I'm so glad Lake Alice closed down. But I wish they would get rid of the buildings, get rid of Lake Alice itself. They need a bulldozer put through them including the fence. I offered to do that for them.

**Statement of Truth**

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_

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