



Media Release

Monday 23 January, 2012

The Royal Women's Hospital today submitted its independent report to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices.

The report, entitled "*Confinement and Delivery Practices in Relation to Single Women Confined at the Royal Women's Hospital 1945 -1975*", details the findings of a study undertaken by Professor Shurlee Swain of the Australian Catholic University. The study was commissioned by the Women's to assist management to understand the hospital's historical role in adoption, specifically with respect to single women, from 1945 to 1975.

The Women's has today apologised to relinquishing mothers. The Chief Executive Dale Fisher said it was important to acknowledge that, whatever the intentions and beliefs of the time, past adoption practices caused lasting consequences for many relinquishing mothers, and sometimes also for their children and their extended families.

"On behalf of the staff, past and present, of the Hospital, I apologise to every woman who felt she had no choice but to relinquish her baby for adoption while in our care," Ms Fisher said.

"I understand many relinquishing mothers experienced, and continue to experience, feelings of grief, pain, anger, helplessness and loss, and for this I apologise unreservedly."

The hospital also offered an unreserved apology to any adoptees and other family members who have also experienced, and continue to experience, feelings of grief, pain, anger and loss.

Ms Fisher said she hoped the Hospital's efforts towards understanding the hospital's role in past adoption practices, the sincere apologies and acknowledgement of pain and loss will bring some comfort to relinquishing mothers and their families, and be accepted as evidence of the regret and sorrow the hospital feels for its involvement in past adoption practices.

Professor Swain's study found that approximately 45 per cent of single women who gave birth at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne between 1945 and 1975 relinquished their babies for adoption. The study found no evidence of illegal practices at the Women's and no evidence of hospital-wide policies that discriminated specifically against single mothers.

The past practices at the Women's, and elsewhere in the nation, were in keeping with social attitudes, available financial support, social work knowledge and beliefs of the time. Some of these practices, such as the immediate removal of the baby following birth to prevent bonding, were thought at the time to be in the best interests of the mother's emotional and mental health post-relinquishment.

Others, such as the belief a couple was better suited than a single mother to bring up a child, were reflective of both the era's societal attitudes towards illegitimacy and the extremely limited social and financial support available to single mothers. When considered by today's standards and knowledge, these past adoption practices were clearly misguided.



Background

In 2009, the Women's was contacted by women claiming that they were coerced into signing adoption papers for babies born at the hospital some thirty to sixty years ago.

In response, the Women's commissioned Professor Shurlee Swain of the Australian Catholic University to produce an independent report to examine the policies, practices, and staff attitudes of the Women's in order to understand how these affected the experiences of single mothers who gave birth at the hospital.

The report will be available on the Inquiry's website at:

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/comm_contrib_former_forced_adoption

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Key Findings of Professor Swain's Report – for background

Professor Swain sought evidence to support specific claims that arose from **either** evidence given at the Senate Inquiry or recollections from women who delivered at the Women's.

1) Provision of equal treatment to married and single mothers

There were several key areas in which the treatment of married and single mothers differed. These practices related to: routine referral to social work department, longer labour, separation on wards, inability to see or care for their baby, and differential access to the service of adoption (married mothers were discouraged from relinquishing their babies). Professor Swain found that these practices were not set down by the Women's nor were they hospital-wide. Rather, the treatment of unmarried women—indeed the treatment of all patients—depended on individual staff values that might have resulted in inequitable practice.

2) Provision of pre- and post-adoption counselling

There is insufficient evidence to judge the quality and extent of counselling over this period. Pre-adoption counselling was limited and it is likely, given the prevailing societal attitudes, that women were not always offered alternatives to adoption.

After 1964, the Women's was obliged by law to provide post-adoption counselling but there is no evidence that this was systematically supplied. Similarly, there is no evidence that single mothers were systematically advised of their right to revoke consent within a certain time period.



3) Provision of information and assistance to obtain special benefits

Patient file records indicate that information and assistance was provided for application for Sickness Benefits. Any other benefits that may have been available were at the discretion of the then Minister for Human Services based on a character assessment of the mother.

The availability of financial assistance to single mothers was central to the perceived ability of a woman to care for her child. It is generally believed that the 1973 introduction of financial assistance to single parents was a major factor in the decreased number of adoptable babies in Australia¹.

4) Non-consensual use of drugs

There is no evidence of non-consensual use of drugs occurring at the Women's. Sedatives and lactation-suppressing drugs were routinely given to both married and unmarried women.

5) Contact between mother and child

Although an unmarried mother was, ostensibly, allowed to see her child if she expressly wished to do so, interviews with relinquishing mothers revealed that many were forbidden contact. The belief that it was kinder for a relinquishing mother not to have contact with her child gained favour among professionals during the 1960s.

6) Coercion to obtain consent

Both Professor Swain's study and evidence given to the Senate Committee suggest that some single mothers believe they were coerced into signing adoption papers. Pressure exerted by the people around some single mothers—from family, friends, clergy, social workers, doctors and/or midwives—appears likely to have been part of the consent process.

Societal pressure on single mothers was enormous, as evidenced by the popular press of the day, including advice columns in "women's magazines" such as *New Idea* and *Woman's Day* and "Letters to the Editor" in popular newspapers, advocating for single women to give up their child for adoption by couples.

¹ Parliamentary Paper No. 355, Standing Committee on Social Issues, Report on Adoption Practices, Second Interim Report, Transcripts of Evidence, 16 June 1999 – 25 October 1999.
Sorry Day 2011