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Mrs A rnadette Wallman RM, IBCLC
(...)

Re: Senate Inquiry into “Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices”

Dear Committee,

First I would like to thank the Commonwealth of Australia for having this inquiry into forced adoption policies & practices, and giving my story a voice along with many others.

Despite my joy at having this amazing opportunity to express myself, I have found the task of collecting thoughts & of writing very difficult, disturbing, distressing & depressing. I apologize that this declaration probably jumps around & may be disjointed & difficult to make sense of, but it’s the best I could do.

I am now an Australian Citizen (1997) but the story of my daughters’ removal took place in England.

My declaration is both as a person who has suffered from a forced adoption, in the UK, & also as a midwife/nurse/IBCLC who has been witness to the forced adoption practices in hospitals & other places where I have worked.

My daughter was born in late 1983. When I first found out I was pregnant my parish priest referred me to the Catholic Adoption Society, & it seems from that point on adoption was the only path available to me – no matter what.

I was 23 years old with a good qualification as a midwife – but my background was that I’d lost my mother at six years old & lost my father to alcoholism on the same day. We were child carers when at home & in child care, childrens homes, foster care, no care – neglect & abuse at various other times. To have survived I certainly had resilience. To have got myself qualified I certainly had a good brain, but I was not your average 23 year old.

My accommodation was dependent on me working (I lived in the nurses home). So later in the pregnancy I was homeless also.

The Catholic Adoption Society gave me two social workers, (...) whose job it was to secure the child for adoption. I saw them about once a month from when I was 10 weeks pregnant! They were older spinster women who were well practiced and skilled at removing children. Initially adoption seemed like an option to me, but as my

belly grew I felt quite different & told them so. They even have documented many of my protests as if they were somehow caring & listening.

Later I moved into a “family situation” that met with the approval of (...) – a good catholic family with 4 children (2 being adopted), an uncle a priest, so I could hardly talk with this family about my fears of adoption! As far as they were concerned it was wonderful. They were well meaning with altruistic ways but had little to no concern for the parents of their adoptees.

Fairly early in the pregnancy I voiced my concerns to the social workers, that I was becoming aware of deep feelings for my unborn child & how it would be hard to give a child to strangers. They said this would not be a problem for me, as they could arrange for me to meet up with the adopters & they assured me it would be fine. This was not what I meant, but things got twisted to their way. This in fact happened at about 36 weeks pregnant. We met up at the church office. They were already waiting for me with their 2 year old adoptee.

I was by this time fairly sure that I could not go through with this – I’d thought we could talk about possible names but I was so stressed we never did. I went out to the bathroom for as long as I could – to catch my breath, to escape the situation, to cry ...until they knocked on the door to retrieve me. The meeting was less than 30 minutes, including my escape. They left the room & I was inconsolable & sobbing. Why was I even here? Where was my voice? (...) seemed to think it went well !but if I hinted at keeping my child or fears of adoption they would challenge me “what was wrong with the adopters”? But the real question was what was wrong with me? How was I so unworthy? This was coercion.

About six months into the pregnancy I also lost my brother (...). This was an enormous loss for me. (...) knew about it, but dismiss it as insignificant as that suited their plan. I got little sympathy & no allowances made for the enormous grief & turmoil I was going through.

My daughter was born in early October 1983. I breast fed her in spite of the strong, documented disapproval of (...) I had no money to buy bottles & formula & surely (...) should have known of the universal benefits of breastfeeding. She was growing & thriving on breastmilk, yet was removed from me just under 3 weeks old.

Breastfeeding children should not be removed from their mother.

(...) then moved my daughter directly into the care of the prospective adopters. So when it was obvious (& documented) that I was not coping with the loss of my daughter 2 weeks later, (...) produce a photo of her being cuddled by the female adopter. I am asked to not be so selfish & to consider the adopters & their 2 year old adoptee who would be devastated to loose his little sister who he now had strong bonds with.

“Forced adoption” has a suggestion in my mind, that force was used, violence & struggles. This was not the case for me & possibly looked normal to others looking from the outside. But

The manipulation of situation, manipulation of words, the relentless coercion from 10 weeks pregnant – if you really love your daughter you’ll do what’s best & give her to the adopters.

Their simply was no choice.

I was never counseled properly by anyone independent – even the Guardian Ad Litem was in “co-hoots” with the adopters – I have documented evidence to prove this when it came to signing the consent they took 3 hours to get my signature. All this time I sat unsupported & alone facing (...) who were beginning to find my reluctance to sign tedious. The duress was enormous. They lied telling me I’d be fine & soon forget about my daughter & have other replacement children when all of the evidence based research that was freely available in 1983 & should have been well known to (...) (...) proved the opposite; Adoptees suffer enormous loss even those in “good” situations, as do their mothers & fathers, siblings, aunts, uncles & cousins & grandparents all suffer great pain & loss – our family certainly did, & the pain & loss continues 28 years later even though we have a fairly good relationship. She will be getting married this year & feels it impossible to have both the adopters & me at the occasion, so I’ve been informed nice & early that I can’t come – though it does seem possible that my other children (her siblings) will attend. Yet another bitter pill to swallow.

I thought it was strange when the pain would not go away, overwhelming & unbearable pain that put me into a black hole called DENIAL. Many thought I was fine. I was certainly busy, working, traveling, having five further children & finding that none could replace my precious 1st born daughter. I did study, built 2 homes, went running, sewing group, choir, church, masters degree became IBCLC. I’m fine, fine, fine.... & in 1999-2000 I had a breakdown.

When adopters got my daughter, LONG before I had signed, they quickly took my daughter to the local parish priest & arranged a baptism – all parties knowing full well that she was not their child – my maiden name appearing in the box for “child’s mother”. The social workers (...) even attending this grand event, even though they should have prevented this happening instead they attend & give their blessing. I HAD NOT EVEN SIGNED A CONSENT FOR THE ADOPTION PROCESS TO START.

When I complained to the Bishop recently his best defense was a laughable “well you never objected to her baptism” – of course its true, but also true that I never knew about it till after the event when it was used as further pressure – “in the eyes of the church & God she belongs to the adopters & god parents now”.

The name change on the baptism certificate was illegal & morally wrong. My daughter was mine. No one has any right to change my daughters name prior to me consenting to the adoption process starting. This document with the name change could possibly have led to further documents being illegally obtained with the bogus name.

To non-catholics this may seem as a trivial complaint, but as a young catholic girl this was enormous to me. I was a once a week worshiper who still went to confession. This really was spiritual abuse, & further “force”.

The signing of the consent for the adoption process to start happened in a local coffee shop-come art gallery. It was a very public place & acutely embarrassing being that I was a local midwife & knew many of the young families all of whom used the local district hospital where I worked for birthing of their children.

It took many coffees. They even document my distress & their impatience at me keeping the local J.P. waiting (never mind screwing up the rest of my life!). It was here they used their trump card & told me about the baptism & the finality of it all. I repeatedly asked to have my daughter back. I only attended to finalise the return of her. I used every word, every action I was ever capable of using. I persisted for 3 hours but (...) simply ignored it all & eventually cried dry – to that point where you have nothing left inside – I was taken to the solicitors’ office down the road & I signed in front of a JP. I was clearly upset. He tried to read me some document about the legal implications of the adoption, But the social workers stopped him, chastising him for distressing me further. It wasn’t him that was distressing me, but them!
It was really my death certificate. I signed despite my resilience through my early life struggles – extreme as they were I have not survived the loss of my daughter.

Despite having “social workers” they never discussed the option or even the possibility of me caring for my daughter myself. They had multiple opportunities to do this with so many visits & the documentation being extensive. Not once do they talk or document “other options” – government benefits, housing, non-government help available. Even without help I had a good job, good wages & was intelligent – without help I was capable but (...) knew how to crush me. I was a walk-over & they’d done it many times before I believe.

My daughter attended hospital with gastric upset / colic while she was still wholly mine. I was not informed – not until we met 20 years later when she “threw it” at me.

I was to be married prior to the adoption being completed. The social workers made no attempt to contact my husband-to-be or to counsel him about the likely outcome of such a move.

In my complaints process with the Agency in recent years they have even agreed “that the adoption of my daughter has caused me enormous pain, suffering, humiliation & depression which I have suffered over 25 years. This should have been foreseen by the

Agency, as by 1984 there was sufficient research based evidence regarding adoption practices”.

Even though they agree, they will do nothing to rectify & restore any of the loss. I have asked for travel allowances for the family & was refused in 2010. It seems brutal to me – to struggle through a complaints process that took over 5 years & to get what felt like a glib “sorry”.

They agreed that complainants need assistance to deal with such emotional & in depth issues – but gave no assistance.

I worked at a large North Shore private hospital (the SAN) between 1995-2000, when we lived in Sydney. I know of one young girl under 18 years (I believe 16 years) who was separated from her baby at birth at the request of the young girls’ mother. The baby became a “boarder” in the special care nursery & the young mother was put on a much higher floor at the hospital. She had no knowledge of where her baby was & was distressed by the separation, but when I questioned all this, the staff said her mum has the private health insurance. I think this was to imply that somehow this gave her mum more say in what happened.

To my shame I did nothing.

Some staff were actively involved in this separation – those working in the nursery & those looking after the mother on the “wrong” ward. Many staff would be unaware of these “goings ons” as it was “not nice” & so kept “hush hush”. I believe that child went directly to the adopters.

In Brisbane in approx. 2005 a lactation consultant of high repute – a fellow of IBCLC – presented a case study of a “high profile family”. The young mother coerced & forced into having the baby adopted by another woman who was known to the family to save the family name. The adopter had had previous children & breastfed them & so worked on re-lactating for this child. The adopter was present at a southside hospital when the baby was born & went straight onto the adopters breast, stayed in hospital with mother & baby putting further duress on the young mother & going home with the baby prior to even the consent being signed.

These things are still happening I believe

As a midwife I have access to client/patient history & also at times do history taking myself & occasionally come across mothers who have had forced adoptions.

The numbers are few, but no doubt there are others that simply deny the previous adoption or find it too painful to speak about it.

Of those who do speak almost 100% have difficulty talking & get upset even though the child was adopted often many years previous. I will get given a date & perhaps the sex of child when I perhaps enquire – was the child breastfed? Was development normal etc? They have no idea about the child – usually separated very early. I will get a few words

like I had no choice My mum insisted as I was young ... What could I do with no help? They assured me it was the best, but it was the worst.

The enormous pain these women carry is so close to the surface – perhaps due to the hormonal surges of this current pregnancy. As a professional it's difficult for me even to listen to these histories & hard to give them the time needed, especially with a work load waiting in the next room.

This is my declaration
with thanks (...)

22/3/11

RM IBCLC.

BERNADETTE WALLMAN.