

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

The Salvation Army – Tasmania

December 2011

Background

The Salvation Army operated the Elim maternity hospital in Lansdowne Street West Hobart between 1924 and 1973. The hospital was part of a three pronged service that provided a hostel for up to 22 girls who would remain for between 6 and 12 months usually 10 weeks prior to giving birth and for varying periods after giving birth for up to one year.

Elim also provided accommodation for 17 women who were described as "pensioners," who were referred via Mental Health Services or the then Royal Derwent Hospital. It was intended that these women would stay for a period of around one year whilst being re-housed.

The third part of the facility was a maternity hospital that contained 13 beds for mothers about to give birth. Whilst the greater number of young women using this facility were described as being pregnant out of wedlock, it was nevertheless an open facility for any mother to access and records indicate that there were a significant number of expectant mothers who did so.

Between the period 1924 to 1973 (49 years) records indicate there were 2177 pregnant women who accessed this hospital, most of whom gave birth at Elim although some were referred to other hospitals. Over this time the number of babies born varied, it might have been as few as 2 but as many as 10 each month. Many of these young women were teenagers, some registered as only 13 years of age.

Elim was not an adoption agency, the Social Welfare Department and Catholic Family Welfare were the only two agencies in the state able to do this (by the end of 1973). Elim's part in the adoption process is described in a farewell brief; a transition document when Matrons were changed. (Val Archer - 8/1/1973) It indicates that "When matron and the Social Welfare Officer is sure of the decision of the lass concerned, the arrangements for the consent form to be signed are made. She then knows she has 30 days to revoke her signature but at the same time is assured and encouraged to give permission for the babe to go to the prospective parents."

Social Context

It would seem clear that the intention of the system prior to 1973 was to encourage the adoption of children born outside of marriage. It was a very different social context. Women, pregnant outside of marriage were considered incapable of making personally responsible decisions and the community it would seem felt that for an unwed mother to retain her child would place both her and the child at considerable risk, particularly if there was no family prepared to support the woman, thus decisions were taken from them and by others, for them.

Val Archer (Now Val Christelow) Matron at Elim for the three years up to the end of 1973 in a recent letter describes the context as such: "Most young women could not tell their parents (particularly their father) because of the stigma of the time. There was little money available to assist them. They were on their own!It was very courageous of these young ladies to

contact us in the first place. They then had to quickly organise themselves to pretend they were going on a working holiday for approximately five to six months."she goes on to say, ..."that because of the view that society had of these young ladies they were limited in where they could go outside our complex in case they were recognised.

It must be understood that all social policy, whilst seeming appropriate in a particular cultural context has unintended consequences. That was true of the situation 50 years ago as it is at the present time.

Hospital processes and practices in respect of adoption

As mentioned, Elim was not an adoption agency it had the responsibility to care for mothers prior too, during and after the birth but Elim staff would have engaged with a young mother around the issue of consent; signing over their baby for adoption. In 1971 of the 74 young women who were resident at Elim the following statistics give an impression of the times:

Adopted	40
Kept by natural mother	11
Fostered	3
Deaths	2
Babes still in nursery	5
Girls ante-natal	6
Girls left hostel during year	7
Total	74

This would seem to suggest that something like more than one in five babies were kept by their natural mother, particularly if fostering is taken into consideration.

As mentioned, there was a 30 day cooling off period within which consent for adoption could be revoked. Thelma Purdue (former nursing staff in early 1970's and currently resident in West Hobart) reports that, "No pressure was applied to the young women. Both baby and mother were cared for with a lot of compassion. We did all we could to help them make their own decision" The Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee into Adoption and Related Services reported ..."It is obvious that the 1970's brought, if slowly in some circles, a new approach to, and a new thinking about the rights of women and of their maternityElim itself had begun to change. The rigidity of thinking which had been manifested in the cloistering of its residents and the strict discipline imposed gave way to a warmer and more compassionate approach." In the light of this comment it is interesting to note a comment in an unsolicited letter from Jennifer Shepherd (former resident 1966), to Mrs Fran Bladel MHA, that relates to the period where a "rigidity of thinking," at Elim, was suggested.

"So mid November 1966, I went into Elim. There were approx. 15 or so more girls there also, from all walks of life – ages ranging from 13-28 and also from interstate. We were girls who were faced with a traumatic situation yet in an environment that was safe and non threatening. I found the staff and officers very friendly, co-operative, willing to talk to you to allay any fears. At no time was I pressured into adopting my child out or became aware that other girls were pressured into doing so. What I can remember was the girls had no support from family – family were not aware of their situation, also societies attitudes.I had my first Christmas away from home and it still remains special – we were treated very well. New Year's Eve I went into labour, after 48 hours I gave birth to twins. I was given the best medical treatment and after care. Still I was not pressured into giving them up for adoption. I left Elim when the twins were 16 days old with assurance from them, if I needed support, to make contact." Such treatment it seems would be contrary to expectations.

Not all experiences of women back then described pressure to adopt and rigidity of thinking, nevertheless the system that was comprised of Medical Practitioners who had the power to make adoptions, welfare department and the hospital were geared to meet the expectations of the community. This was a systemic approach and in the early 70's that system had begun to change.

To the present

The Salvation Army like all community agencies is not in a position to act unilaterally, it is so now and was the case 40 years ago. We act within a system of partnerships and shared responsibilities and always within a specific cultural context. There are times we are able to influence the shape of this culture and times we respond to its demands. In the matter of adoptions the Salvation Army acted in concert with other Not For Profit Providers, Government Agencies including Social Services and Health, the Medical Profession and the expectations and values of a very different community to that which we experience today.

We also exist within the social context of the day and respond to the norms and values of that time and as the social world is changing so The Salvation Army is changing with it.

The Salvation Army understands that people come seeking support and assistance in the dark moments of their life when they are in a challenging and sometimes helpless space. We also recognise that one person may well respond to a situation in a very different way to another and do recognise that whilst many experience the services we have to offer in a positive way, inevitably others will have the opposite experience. If this occurred as the result of providing maternity services at Elim, we deeply regret it happening.

We recognise also, that with the passage of time, a person may well reflect on the chaos and stress of a former experience and relive again that moment as deeply traumatic, being able to articulate it perhaps for the first time. If this has happened as the consequence of the actions of The Salvation Army at Elim, we deeply regret it.

Commonwealth response

Whilst adoption has remained a states responsibility, the terms of reference to this inquiry ask the question about a Commonwealth role in developing a national framework to assist states and territories in addressing the consequences for the mothers, their families and children who were subject to forced adoption policies.

Important for healing is for one's story to be both told and heard. For those damaged by forced adoptions, the telling of their story publically across the nation not only broadens our general understanding from where we have come but an opportunity is provided for all who have experienced this for understanding, acceptance and healing.

The Commonwealth at that time provided no support for single mothers as it does today, in failing to do this, it too reflected the culture and values of the time. The Commonwealth is in a position through its many agencies to ensure that all who have felt the pain of forced adoptions, be provided with appropriate counselling and support, be they mothers or adopted children. In addition the Commonwealth is able to ensure the preparation of professional staff to effectively deal with the trauma experienced.

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