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28 June 2012

Submission to parliament June 2012

My name is [REDACTED]. I am a 53 year old registered nurse. I have four adult children two grandchildren and a very supportive husband. I did my nursing training at Prince Henry and Prince of Wales Hospitals from 1978-1981. After having my children I returned to university and completed a degree on nursing. I also have a post grad diploma in cardiac nursing, I have also attended management courses. Usually I am a self assured and confident and fit and healthy woman. At the moment I am recovering from bullying which has been going on for nearly four years. This has left me emotionally and physically unwell.

Unfortunately my recent experience is that workplace bullying is much more prevalent than any of us can imagine. I have witnessed workplace bullying over the 32 years of working as a registered nurse in the NSW health system. There have been times when I have been the target of such bullying and I have always been able to 'stand up' for myself and address the bullying behaviours with positive outcomes. I have worked in all manner of roles from registered nurse on various wards and doctors surgeries to Nursing Unit Manager. In July 2008 I took 3 months long service leave to travel with my husband. Upon return the nurse who relieved me in my position took offence to my return and I then became the subject of her on going taunts lies gossiping and undermining behaviours.

At first I thought these were jokes or my imagination, however, things became worse over the years. I attempted addressing my concerns with the 'bullying'. She denied that her intentions were harmful and said she would never bully anyone as she had been bullied at school. When I did speak to her about specific incidences she said she was joking. I reported the matter to my immediate supervisor who said I'd be fine because I was a strong and stable person whereas the 'bully' was insecure and had problems relating to her childhood. The behaviours were constant and unrelenting. She attempted to engage all new staff in the fiasco. Most of the permanent staff knew better than to believe the lies yet all of us were powerless. Others reported the issue to our supervisor. Still, nothing was done. I began to withdraw and not function as well at work as I used to which only gave her more ammunition. This went on till January 2011 when I finally went to Human Resources (HR). They told me to go back to my manager who told me she was sick of hearing about the problem. In March 2011 I became very ill with Depression and anxiety with suicidal ideation. I was assessed by an independent psychologist from QBE and he believed that my illness was purely work related. I was commenced on antidepressants by my GP and began seeing a psychologist. Initially I paid for these myself but QBE has paid for all treatment since. I had two weeks off work. On my return I had to have further dealing with HR. This only served to make my condition worse. After a month back at work I was sent home by the staff health doctor and had 7 weeks off. During this time I arranged to have a meeting with HR to discuss a way forward. Previously they had sent me NSW health policies regarding bullying and harassment. I read these several times and thought I had a good understanding of what I could expect from the process. The meeting on 16 June 2011 proved to be extremely frustrating as it seemed that HR was not going to follow due process. It seemed they had already made their decision regarding the matter. At that stage they had had lengthy discussions with the bully and my manager but had not given me an opportunity to respond. In fact I later found out from the staff health doctor that my managers had

told HR not to take me seriously and that I had other agendas for my actions. On June 16 I insisted that the policies laid out by NSW health be followed and reluctantly they gathered information from key witnesses. I was told by the staff health doctor that the HR staff member told her that it was looking bad for the bully as witnesses validated my claims however he planned to present the facts in such a way as to make me look like the offender. As you might imagine I was terrified and totally devastated. I was asked to sign a transcript of conversations with HR, I refused to sign them as they were incorrect and misleading, Fortunately I asked for all meetings to be recorded. And I requested that all these recordings be given to the decision maker. I was spoken to rudely and in a threatening manner many times by HR. I took a support person along to all meetings and she agrees that the manner in which I was dealt with was intimidating and threatening.

During this time I called the NSW Nurses association. After they had a discussion with HR I was told that they would not support me as HR had told them there had been a counter complaint and that I in fact was the instigator of the bullying. So I found myself in a terrifying position. I called the bullying help line who again was no help at all. All they told me was what the policy states and gave me a number for life line. I explained that I knew the contents of the policy. The problem was that the policy was not being followed. They said they couldn't help me. I also called legal aid and the lawyer I spoke to suggested I resign as this would take it's toll on my health, He said bullying in the health department is rife and there is no legislation against bullying in Australia. He suggested it was best to walk away. I was appalled. Here was an area Health Service which had volumes of policies in place but they did not plan to follow their own policies. Over this period of time I tried all sorts of avenues including the ombudsman and NSW health with no helpful outcome. Throughout these months I did have a great deal of emotional support from Deborah O'Neill's office, however once again their hands were tied. Throughout this ordeal I always resisted taking legal action as I didn't

want serious repercussions for the bullies, I was always mindful of the impact such action would have on their families.

I was removed from my workplace and placed in a very menial role as a supernumery staff member in another unit. The bully was promoted onto my role.! When I questioned this I was told it was operational.

Eventually, after very little feedback and no opportunity to respond a meeting was called with the 'decision maker'. This meeting was held 31 October 2011. She (the decision maker) had read all the interviews and listened to all the recordings (as I requested because the reports were misleading). The decision was made in my favour and it was acknowledged that I had indeed been bullied and that the bully had admitted to her behaviours. I was offered a letter of apology from the bully by the decision maker.

Two weeks later I was hand delivered a letter from a member of HR. I was expecting the letter of apology, instead it was a letter stating that I was equally guilty of bullying and was once again I was threatened with disciplinary action.

After this my symptoms of depression worsened. I emailed the CEO and asked him what I should do next. He put me in touch with the newly appointed Director of Workforce for the Central Coast Area Health Service. Fortunately this woman took the time to listen. We spent many hours discussing what had happened to me. She has taken considerable steps to change the process and is working on culture change. We have a huge job to do as culture change needs to start in the HR department It has taken till just last week to finally resolve the issue. I still have not received my letter of apology and never will. I also asked to meet with the HR staff member who conducted my case, but he has refused to meet with me. It has been explained to me that his behaviour was not misconduct but rather that he was confused and didn't understand the policy. It has been such a long drawn out process, Unfortunately my situation is not uncommon. However most people resign when they hit the HR brickwall. I am still on workers comp and have not nbeen able to work for the last 6 weeks. I to go back to work 4 hours a day 3 days a

week from next month. I have had an assessment by a psychiatrist and he suggested medical retirement, however I told him I really want to try returning to work one more time. He likens my condition to post traumatic stress disorder. It was bad enough to be bullied but then to have management and HR turn on me too was devastating. In a survey conducted by NSW health in 2011 our hospital was given the dubious honour of having the highest rate of complaints of bullying in the state.

The CEO and Director of workforce seem sincere in their efforts to bring about change, however if there is no legislation to support them it's very difficult to manage. The Bully has moved on to a new workplace for a 'fresh start'. The manager refused to attend sessions to help her with future cases of bullying and has since retired. I now have the full support and understanding of HR but it was a long time coming, and my career path has been upended and my health has deteriorated. It will be quite some time before I am able to resume my role as a useful and competent member of the workforce. I would love to discuss this matter further, As you can imagine writing this letter has been quite an ordeal for me, however, I feel so strongly about the effects of bullying that I am more happy to help in any way I can. I will be away for most of July and will be returning 22 July. Please do not hesitate to contact me. There are so many other issues which need to be addressed

Sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the sender's name and signature.