

# Senate Inquiry on Government Compensation Payments

## Introduction

This submission is to support the case of all abused, neglected and deprived children who are now formally called the Forgotten Australians. The apology by the Prime Minister to us was fundamental in recognizing that the lack of care combined with the individual and systemic abuse has had long term consequences for all of us. Funding to support the Forgotten Australians cope with the long term health effects of childhood neglect and trauma is vital for our human rights. We needed to be protected and were not and now in our middle to ageing years we need additional resources for a reasonable quality of life and to live with dignity.

I write this submission on behalf of all the Forgotten Australians and in particular myself and my two sisters.

I request that our privacy is maintained and ask that you suppress my name and details if this document becomes public.

## Background

My sisters with me were wards of the state in Victoria and spent the substantial part of our childhoods in the Good Shepherd Convents in Melbourne and Bendigo. The lack of care, abuse, enforced work as children and inadequate nutrition are matters of history now. However this history is not well documented because the nuns told us we should be ashamed of what we did. This repeated blaming resulted in an individual and combined guilt and shame that we have not been able to shake off. We have been left feeling that we were the failures of society. This combined with the belief that the religious order and Catholic Church could not do wrong ensured that the girls from the Good Shepherd homes could and would not speak out. Such is the extent of the indoctrination that we were sinners and failures that the Good Shepherd girls have not spoken publicly about the abuse and continue to suffer physically and psychologically. It is believed that the Good Shepherds fared well in the Senate enquiry that resulted in the report about the Forgotten Generations. because of the inability of the girls

My sisters and i were just little children placed into homes as toddlers because our mother suffered with mental illness. We had done nothing wrong and nor had she.

Most Good Shepherd girls remain stigmatized and reluctant to come forward. As an example, in the time I lived in Bendigo if I by chance I came across a girl from St Aidans Convent/Orphanage at a public forum (party, conference, shopping centre) they would take me aside and plead with me not to let on to anyone that they had been 'in the home'. As an adult even with the social networking sites such as Face Book, School Friends Australia I 'find' about one girl every 10 years even though I lived with 200 or more girls in that time. Many of these girls were close friends and confidantes in their childhoods. I write this to explain that silence from such a large group of people should not be interpreted as evidence that the nuns did not do harm. The silence is evidence of their suffering then and the ongoing psychological effects.

This is the first time my sisters and I have been able to step forward. The level of emotional distress was too great for us to write a submission to the previous Senate Inquiry into the Forgotten Generations. We met up in Canberra for the Apology which somehow has given us the strength to see that all that suffering and subsequent poor health must be addressed. I looked around at my fellow Forgotten Generation comrades and have never seen a more motley group of middle aged people in poor health *anywhere*. This crowd were distressed and traumatized by their upbringings in 'care' and physically ill; many were disabled and dependent on others to make the journey to Canberra. They were in pain, limping, prematurely aged suffering with painful knees and damaged hips. The results of years of scrubbing floor-boards, inadequate nutrition, neglect and abuse.

A summary of our experiences is listed here to justify what the injuries were that mean the Forgotten Generation require assistance in our middle years and as we age. We need to be compensated so the money can be used to moderate some of the long term ill-effects of our childhoods.

### **Key Issues**

- Childhood neglect
- Poor nutrition
- Shame and stigma
- Poor physical health particularly damaged joints and osteoporosis
- Poor mental health particularly phobias and post traumatic stress disorder
- Isolation
- Being a silent witness to other children's abuse
- Health effects of enforced work as children

- Health effects from abuse and neglect
- Inadequate medical and dental care as children
- Abuse and punishments

I will provide you with a sample of comments from myself and my sisters' experiences:

- Although the building looked like something royalty lived in it had no heating, and every winter I got severe chilblains that caused my fingers and knuckles to ache and bleed. The pain was extreme and I couldn't hold a pencil to write and there was no pain relief - to this day my fingers ache terribly whenever they get cold.
- The orphanage had a 'resident' male prowler who would climb up pipes and get into the building and wander around in the dark scaring the children. The nuns slept 100's of metres away in another building and couldn't hear when the children screamed in fear at seeing him. I developed a fear of the dark that still limits me to this day - I can't go outside in my own yard after dark no matter how hard I try to overcome this fear. I am terrified if the lights are turned out in the room I am in, and a light is not in the room I am about to enter.
- On one occasion, I wouldn't eat a meal they served so they served it back to me for breakfast lunch and tea for 4 days, leaving me at the table alone in the dining room for hours and hours, even after dark. Eventually it got mouldy and they worked out I was not going to eat it even if I starved. They put me in the isolation room for a day as punishment for not eating the meal - to this day I still remember the smell of that meal.
- I tied some girl's apron strings together during choir lesson as a joke and when they tried to stand up they were all linked. For punishment I had a four foot ruler put down my back and had to stand upright for the day and stand beside my bed long after everyone else went to bed. In the end a nun came and took it out and I was allowed to lay down.
- I was only allowed to have a visit with my two older sisters who lived in the home on the same grounds for a few hours each month. If I did any tiny thing wrong during the month the nuns would cancel my visit and I would go months without seeing my sisters. I got sent to see the psychiatrist many times and he would tell the nuns 'she is just home sick, she needs to see her family' but it made no difference, they kept me from my siblings for no good reason. If I was caught even waving to them in church I would be punished.
- Freezing cold, no jumpers or coats. They knew we were cold because if visitors came we were given jumpers and coats which were taken off us as soon as the visitors left.
- Never seeing doctors unless you were very sick or in extreme pain. At one home we had lots of needles, lined up being jabbed time and time again. ? vaccination experiments as some of the universities used the kids in homes for research.

- Seeing other kids disappear out of their beds in the middle of the night and never being seen again. Living in fear that you would be next. Listening to the girls say what happened to ?? – and telling you the nuns killed her.
- Being witness to other girls' punishments, such as psychological humiliation, beatings and isolation felt as bad as being the recipient of such punishment. 'The silent witness'.
- At one home, the student dentists used to come and practice dentistry on us calling us back time and time again to practice drilling and doing fillings we did not need just so they could learn. No pain relief or anesthesia was given. We have damaged teeth because there is very little of our teeth left, just shells that will not support the chewing they are expected to do. The cavities they created and filled mean our teeth are crumbling now and we need expensive dental work.
- Doing repetitive work as children in the laundry, pulling linen off the hot mangles and folding sheets hour after hour. Being underweight and exhausted but not being allowed sit down or take a break, having to keep working all the time and in the school holidays work more. We have damage to joints from the repetitive work as children.
- St Aidans was used as a diversion by the police for men in Bendigo who committed sex crimes when the police did not want to prosecute. The girls were punished by being placed in St Aidans 'for what they had done' and the men were never charged. My friend from Bendigo was raped by her neighbours and placed in St Aidans in the middle of the night without medical attention. The nuns believed she was morally abhorrent and she was punished repeatedly during her time there. The psychological abuse was particularly cruel. The offender was not prosecuted.
- Poor education: this is a combination of inadequate teaching, no resources and institutional life. For example two of us did our schooling by correspondence, often without the text books we needed to complete the assignments.
- Not having enough food, and always being hungry. The long term effects of both poor nutrition (slops) and not enough food.
- Cleaning and working done on knees for hours, having to redo it if the nun didn't think you put full effort in to it or she didn't like you. For example, cleaning the stairway with a toothbrush for hours.
- I used to have the urine soaked sheets placed over head for wetting the bed. There were no toilets in the small children's dormitory to go to the toilet

anyway. I was only three.

- Locked in the infirmary in the attic (sick bay) terrified you would be forgotten because there was no-one there to care for you. I still have a fear if the bedroom door is closed, not feeling safe in my own bedroom is something I have not been able to get over.
- Cumulative damage of living in the cold environment. Can I suggest you turn your heater off for the next 5 years and see if it has any long term effect on your health?

*We apologise for relaying these stories. We do not want to be seen as bleating about bad times because we are only interested in talking about the future. The past is history and we do not want this to be the focus of this submission. This history is only presented to explain the injuries and negative health effects from this. The true issue now is about living comfortably and independently and receiving adequate support as any other Australian would want.*

Our past should not dictate our futures any more.

### **Independence and support**

The additional support that many forgotten Australians require now is the support that other Australians normally require in late age eg. 70's and 80's. We emphasize that we are old before our years and need the additional support now. For some of the Forgotten Generation it may not be too late for ameliorative or rehabilitative intervention but many of us require support at the tertiary level.

We did not have the social determinants of health and this can be seen in the poor health we have now. We should be in good health, physically active, functionally independent and able to work for as long as we choose but instead we are in poor health, deteriorating each year and becoming more dependent. Most Australians require health care in the last few years of their lives. Many of the Forgotten Generation need that assistance now. Our needs extend beyond medical care. We need considerable more support for daily living which is outside the scope of medical care in order to remain independent and live our lives in dignity. Some of our injuries are work related from the work regimes we undertook as children in the homes and the Good Shepherd laundries. We should be entitled to compensation as anyone else in Australia who suffers ill-health as a consequence of work. The cleaning, bed-making, dishes, floor mopping and housework generated by 100 or so children was undertaken by those 100 or so children. This was the work (albeit unpaid) that resulted in work related injuries.

We need additional support to manage the activities of daily living such as assistance with transport, aids to daily living, housekeeping support as well as dental and medical care. There needs to be redress for the damage so that the money can be used to provide some level of independence, to offset the increased financial costs of functional support and medical care. Have you looked at the cost of a house cleaner lately? This is a considerable cost and cannot be claimed on Medicare or private health insurance (for the few that have it) of course. We are past primary and secondary intervention and need access to tertiary services as part of rehabilitation.

The Forgotten Australians should not live the next two decades in despair that we will not receive the support that we clearly require now.

### **Current redress schemes**

Each state has a different redress scheme, in Victoria it is a case by case basis where an individual has to sue the government and prove damages. The government argues that the church was responsible for our care and the church, in true Catholic style, deny any responsibility. Each handballs the responsibility to the other and the effect is no-one is taking responsibility for the current problems that the lack of care and system have caused.

The current redress system in Victoria requires individuals to have considerable money, time and effort and psychological and physical stamina to apply. Then there is the issue of evidence and timeframes. The records, if they exist at all, do not chart the environment, lack of care and poor nutrition any more than they document the abuse, failure to respond to the needs of children for protection, and medical care.

Furthermore, injuries sustained cannot be demonstrated so easily. It is not as simple as fractures that can be shown with an ex ray and classified as open fracture, incomplete, transverse etc. There are as many problems with defining injuries as there is in coming up with the evidence to support the claims.

The definition of sexual abuse is easier to define but psychological abuse from fear, neglect and mistreatment are harder to categorise. We are well aware that the damaging effects on physical and mental health are insidious and not so easily quantifiable. It is the compound effect on the health of the Forgotten Generation that needs to be adequately addressed.

Redress schemes vary between states - cut off dates vary between States as does the amount individuals are eligible for. In addition, in some states ward of state children are eligible for redress while others are not. Children who suffered the same trauma and abuse deserve the same level of support and redress.

But more significant that this is the battle for compensation. This is traumatizing in itself and re-traumatizing to go through the experiences again; feeling you have to prove your innocence. My sisters and I pride ourselves on our outlook and determination to work full time, despite our disabilities but the sheer effort of compiling this brings us to tears. This is a very distressing for us; how could we have the strength to fight the church and the government who did not look after us in childhood when we feel so frail now?

The Federal Government needs to show leadership in this as they have done with many other situations. They need to take a stand and insist, like the Irish Government, that the churches and organisations work with the government together to find a redress scheme that treats all Australians equally and with dignity. The Mercy Order, Good Shepherd Orders, Uniting Church, Salvation Army along with the government homes provided inadequate care and protection and should be held accountable to fund a reasonable redress scheme.

## **Summary**

The Forgotten Generation have clear histories of trauma and abuse with subsequent poor psychological and physical health. In addition, they carry injuries as a result of the work regimes (cleaning etc) and unpaid work (industrial laundry duties etc). The individual redress system (with varying cutoffs, burden of proof, eligibility requirements) is inadequate and ineffective in most cases. The lack of documentation and re-traumatizing excludes many from even starting the process.

We are not eligible for workers compensation although our injuries are a consequence of work.

There is no system in place that allows for redress to provide for the additional costs and support required to live a reasonable quality of life. Our past should not dictate our futures any more.

The Forgotten Generation fit the adage 'old before their time', we are disabled and becoming dependent. A redress scheme is required to ensure the dignity, health and support needs of this group of people. The Federal Government magnanimously apologized for the past; they need to take the next step and provide leadership to the states and church groups in the area of compensation.

I ask that my name and details are not included in this submission if it becomes a public document.