

SUBMISSIONS TO INQUIRY INTO COMMONWEALTH CONTRIBUTION TO FORMER FORCED ADOPTION POLICIES AND PRACTICE

This writer has been moved to make this contribution to the Inquiry because of the plethora of media reports on certain practices allegedly carried out by governments and staff of hospitals and institutions relating to the adoption of babies some fifty to sixty years ago.

As a former trainee nurse and midwife during the early part of that period, I feel it incumbent upon me to correct some of the misconceptions which have arisen and to take issue with the many gross misstatements of fact which seem to be accepted by the Committee as absolute truths.

One such is that these natural mothers were 'forced' into placing their children for adoption. What exactly is meant by the term 'forced'? From my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, there was pressure, mainly from parents or other family members of the pregnant woman but I certainly did not see any evidence of a mother being physically forced into giving up her child as is alleged so emotively by some of the witnesses. There was no gun held at their heads or threats of violence. Rather the opposite.

Many of the mothers with whom I came into contact could not wait to have the whole "experience" over and banished from their mind. At the time, many pretended their time in hospital did not happen, and that it was all a bad dream. I remember vividly one young girl who had come from interstate and spent some time in the hospital before delivery. Many months after the birth, I saw her standing at a bus stop. Pleased to see her I approached to inquire after her health and well-being but, on recognising me, she abruptly turned on her heel and walked away. I was rather disappointed as we had become quite friendly but then I realised that I was part of her past and she did not want to be reminded of that. I don't doubt there were mothers who wanted to keep their babies but no-one ever expressed so to me.

What I take issue with is the all embracing criticism and vindictiveness of most of the witnesses to the Inquiry against all and sundry involved in the adoption process. This presents a serious denial of natural justice towards all those doctors and nurses and ancillary staff who tried their very best to make the experience of these mothers so much less traumatic than it would otherwise have been. As one doctor told me, "one cannot do any better than one's best..." Obviously, that best was not good enough.

The hospital and ancillary staff of all these institutions could not have been the ogres the witnesses would have us believe. By the law of averages, there must have been some good people. From my own personal observations I challenge any suggestion that my former colleagues treated these mothers other than with the utmost professionalism and respect.

We all know that distance often lends enchantment to happy places and events. Conversely, memory can magnify and grossly distort real or imaginary bad experiences to the extent that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. Suffice it to say that expressions such as 'betrayal', 'forcibly removed', 'unjustly abused', 'manipulation', '...to satisfy the ideals of others', 'abduction', 'denial of rights', 'persecuted', 'nefarious' and more, with allegations of being 'shackled to a bed', 'illegal procedures and crimes' and so on makes one wonder what is fact or fiction. Some of these women seem to be endowed with the most vivid and most lurid of imaginations.

Just exactly how and where was the witness concerned 'shackled to a bed'? In prison somewhere? Was the shackling carried out with chains, handcuffs, or other heinous instrument of torture? Or was she simply restrained from hurting herself and her baby by having a sheet wrapped tightly around her or restrained with bandages applied to her wrists? Some people have a very low pain threshold and labour pains can be extremely severe. Besides, it must be remembered that many of these mothers were very young, away from home and family and no doubt terrified, not only of being in a strange hospital or other institution but of the thought of giving birth itself. It was a time period of unsophisticates.

Another witness complains of being given medication to dry up her milk. Did she want to end up with engorged breasts with possible abscesses on her nipples? If she was not feeding her baby, how else was she to stop lactating? She could have taken the natural route over many painful days but it is manifestly obvious that the nursing staff meant to help her, not hinder her.

A further witness alleges she was drugged after the birth. Please! Most probably she was suffering the after effects of normal pain killers which had been given her during labour. She would have been given a drug to assist in expelling the placenta but in all, her "drugged" state could simply be reaction to the traumatic events pre and post delivery. Birth experiences are individualistic. One size does not fit all. There was no sinister conspiracy to cause her any harm of that I am sure. If she was given a sedative after birth, she probably needed it.

The practice of holding up a sheet in front of the mother or having a pillow placed on her stomach to prevent her from seeing the child was not an act of cruelty as has been portrayed but an act of kindness. The prevailing theory propagated at the time was that the less the mother saw or heard or had anything to do with her baby after birth the trauma of giving it up at a later date would be considerably reduced. It was an act of compassion. Misplaced, perhaps, but compassion none the less. Of course, this theory has now been debunked but, as with many other things, society and the medical profession did not have the knowledge and wisdom of foresight.

As to these alleged "illegal procedures and crimes", have they been particularised? If not why not? Surely, those accused have a right to state their cases and defend their actions if need be.

It may be very difficult for younger people to grasp the fact that fifty plus years ago there was a very strict moral code with very few areas of grey, unlike today's moral vacuum or liberalism (whichever one prefers) where children are having children with no restraint, ably assisted by taxpayer funded government largesse including pensions, baby bonuses, housing, educational assistance and more. A Child Support Agency had not yet morphed into anyone's consciousness while "counselling" as a profession was virtually unknown. Today counsellors are, like lemmings, everywhere!

It was a world beyond all imaginings and the mothers, the subject of this Inquiry, know that it was. To say so is not the "propaganda" of the "pro-adoption" advocates or "the continued trite and offending excuses for actions of immeasurable inhumanity towards us mothers" as described by one witness. They are statements of fact. The seemingly cruel, raw fact of life as it was over a half century ago. And, as mentioned supra, these mothers were and are well aware of this.

In my submission, the Committee should endeavour to ensure that this Inquiry does not degenerate into a witch hunt with these mothers finding in it a venue for wallowing in their own misery and guilt whilst at the same time blaming everyone else but themselves for their sorry situation. They opened their legs to their then boyfriends or lovers and, whether intended or not, a child was conceived. Some responsibility must be accepted by these mothers for what followed.

Decisions had to be made. For the following nine months or thereabouts, they had time to consider their options. If marriage was not one of them or if parents or family members could not or were not prepared to take and rear the child, the only other options were adoption or keeping the child oneself. At the outset, it seemed to me that adoption was the option of choice for most mothers during those months. Termination of the pregnancy was not a viable option.

That some changed their minds after the birth is obvious from the evidence and their grief and loss is palpable. But what was done then, cannot be undone. Ever! All the Inquiries and Royal Commissions in the world will not alter that fact and it is with the greatest respect that I submit society is failing these women in prosecuting this Inquiry.

Rather than give closure to the many mothers affected by the adoption process, it is serving only to flagellate already deep, raw and weeping wounds while encouraging the most sensitive to fall into an abysmal mire of self pity and remorse. For other warped and bitter souls, born of years of brooding on past grievances, it provides an excuse for them to magnify and distort events in their search for retribution.

If mothers wanted to keep their babies so badly, I'm sure they could have done so. True, there was pressure and these mothers were at their most vulnerable but if they really, really, wanted to keep them, it could have been done. One suspects that it was easier for them to 'go with the flow' at the time. And there's the rub! I submit this is a far cry from any sense of 'force' or 'abduction'.

What is conspicuously absent then and now is any mention of the menfolk who contributed to the pregnant state of these mothers. Where were they then? Where are they now? There were no virgin births. Do many, if any, know they fathered a child? Literally, these women were left "holding the baby" and alone had to make one of the most momentous decisions of their lives.

Adoption, per se, is beyond the scope of this brief but I would submit that in any future reforms of existing legislation both State and Federal, cognisance be given to the state of play envisioned in the next twenty or so years when children born of surrogacy arrangements and those children in gay and lesbian relationships will be saying, "Who am I?" As it is biologically impossible for gay and lesbian couples to propagate a child together, there will be numerous children asking who their natural mothers and fathers might be and how they, the children, came into existence. Children born of I.V.F. procedures will have similar identity problem.

I note that various "Expert" witnesses have given evidence to this Inquiry. Unfortunately, I have not had the time to acquaint myself of the contents of their proofs but unless they can speak with first hand knowledge of the institutions and medical and nursing procedures relating to these mothers, I would suspect their evidence to be of hearsay value only and, while not being bound by the rules of evidence, I respectfully submit the Committee should bear this in mind.