



MHCN mental health carers nsw

MHCN Four Corners Report 'Don't judge us'

On the 24th of August, ABC's Four Corners ran an episode on a very difficult issue, albeit one of great public interest and importance. The program 'Please Don't Judge' told of a mental health system that can't always provide care to those 'at risk of harm to self or others', through a few case studies with horrific outcomes. It highlighted the risks when treatment is not made available to people experiencing mental illness; even when they actively seek it. But the support needed is too frequently *not* available. Not enough services are funded to prevent acute mental illness or to guarantee access to mental health care for those in crisis.

The subject is a sensitive one because many people in Australian society hold the false view that people who experience mental illness are dangerous. However, research shows people who experience mental illness are significantly more at risk of being the *targets* of violence than perpetrators. Linking mental illness with violence can dehumanise people with a mental illness and to allow others to unconsciously rationalise inadequate assistance and poor outcomes, like poverty, homelessness, and early death. This is called 'stigma'.

In Australia we believe the community has an obligation to help people when they cannot help themselves, and yet we often fail to provide realistic help. When we fail, real people suffer. If there isn't a bed available in a mental health inpatient unit when a person needs one, clinicians must play a grisly lottery of deciding who needs help *most*, rather than being able to help *everyone who needs it, when they need it*. What happens to those who need help but are denied it, passes beyond our system's control and sometimes beyond the control of the person denied care and their families too.

The apparent intention of the producers of this program was to draw attention to a great injustice, in the hope of promoting positive change. The program was stories told by carers and it also seemed that the person who they had supported, agreed with their story being told this way. Some community members described it as giving a new insight into our mental health system's problems and the human impact of its failures. However, the program also caused alarm and offense to many

people who experience mental illness and their families and carers, because of the sensitive subject matter, and because the voices of people with a mental illness were not directly heard in the program.

This divergence of responses across the mental health community justifies our commitment to co-design as a mechanism to understand and reconcile the experience and diversity of that 'lived experience' community. The direct inclusion of advocates for people with experience of a mental illness would have helped the producers to respect not just the personal experience of program participants, but also given an awareness and understanding of the broad range of sensitivities of people with such lived experience; the full range of which *even program participants with lived experience* may not be aware.

MHCN fully supports carers of people with experience of a mental illness and the people they care for, in their ongoing struggle to have their stories told more fairly and faithfully, and to have the freedom to choose if and how they tell them. Where people can tell their own stories, that is always preferable, and every effort should be made to assist. But if they choose others as their advocates, this choice can be respected as preferable to silence.

MHCN supports consumers and carers who have *difficult* stories to tell, to allow us to understand the full scale of our problems, so long as they respect the rights and dignity of others and take care to avoid perpetuating trauma and stigma.

MHCN also welcomes the efforts of those who strive in good faith to help us tell *all* our stories, and is committed to work with all who are willing to do so to find how to tell them in fairer, more sensitive, inclusive, and authentic ways.

The mission of MHCN is to connect mental health carers across the state for mutual support and self-advocacy; and to collaborate with all forms of 'lived experience' advocacy to evoke the solidarity of humanity, to expel stigma and inspire reform.

Through the network of carer advocates, and by supporting others, we hope to help make the case to the community for the value of creating a mental health system in which everyone can receive the respect, recognition and help they need, when they need it.

We believe this is our best chance of creating the future we all want; so our community will no longer have to accept the terrible consequences for innocent people of a lack of access to mental health services, and nor will the people who love and care for them.