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Justice Action
PO Box 386
BROADWAY 2007

Attention: Mr Michael Poynder

Dear Mr Poynder

Thank you for your correspondence of 7 May 2008. I also acknowledge a telephone conversation with you on that day. I understand from your email that you are a coordinator at Justice Action which is a social justice group focussing particularly on the treatment of prisoners in jails in Australia and internationally.

You refer to "a problem" which currently exists at the Long Bay Prison and you advise me that to save labour costs the Department of Corrective Services has reduced the hours out of cells for the mental health patients by locking them in at 3.30 pm rather the usual 9.30 pm.

You indicate that you understand that these increased restrictions are "highly undesirable" for mental health patients and "could significantly impact on their rate of self harm and trauma."

Attached to your email to me was a photocopy of an article from the weekend edition April 25-27 2008 of the Sydney Morning Herald titled "No Butts Edict Raises Harm Risk for Patients."

That document refers to the lockdown time for forensic mental health patients at Long Bay being moved from 9 pm to 3.30 pm "forcing patients to sit alone in their cells for about eighteen hours a day."

The article goes on to note that nurses and the prisoner support group Justice Action are concerned "that the extended lockdown will exacerbate the patients' mental health symptoms and reduce the number of contact hours with doctors and nurses."

Reference is made to two suicide attempts occurring since the new hours commenced on 2 April 2008.

A Corrective Services spokesperson said the new hours at Long Bay were in line with those at Silverwater and patients at both prisons had access to health care and are allowed out of their cells to smoke. The spokesperson said there had been no increase at all in the rate of self harm or violence.

I also received copies of media releases and a copy of a letter generated by the New South Wales Nurses' Association addressed to the Attorney General dated 29 April 2008.

The newspaper article suggests that the changed lockdown arrangements are in preparation for a move to the new Long Bay Hospital and it is noted that the forensic hospital had lost twenty eight prison officers as part of the changes.

Having been responsible in the past for the administrative and clinical transfer of a large high security forensic hospital from the jurisdiction of Corrective Services to the Health Department, I am fully aware of the many complex issues which need to be considered and addressed to ensure that patients are moved safely between one facility and another. This may require alterations in the policies and procedures in the corrections run facility prior to the transfer to the health facility.

What is, however, critically important in terms of psychiatric care is that patients should be managed in the least restrictive environment possible. This of course applies to all mentally ill people but in particular to those who are involuntary patients in high secure settings.

There are at times clinical needs which result in a patient being placed into seclusion or being denied access to the ward environment, but if there are no clinical reasons why patients should be secluded, only administrative ones, then that obviously raises concerns.

Mentally ill people are vulnerable because of their mental illnesses and even prisoners who do not suffer mental illnesses develop psychological and sometimes psychiatric symptoms when they are placed into seclusion.

Potentially self harming behaviour could increase if patients are secluded for long periods of time and it might be prudent for the Department of Corrective Services to conduct an in-house review of this particular issue to ensure that self harming behaviour is not in fact increasing as a result of the altered policies.

An important issue will be how long the new arrangements are to remain in place. If these administrative changes are likely to continue for weeks and months, then that is obviously of concern and the new policies should be reviewed. I do not know when the new hospital expects to open but obviously the less restrictive an environment is for a mentally ill person, the better it is in a general sense for their overall mental state and general being.

Based on the material I have received from you, I share your concerns and the concerns of the New South Wales Nurses' Association in relation to the more restrictive management programs which I understand have been implemented in the Long Bay Prison Hospital since 2 April 2008.

Yours sincerely



Bruce Westmore

cc: RANZCP Forensic Psychiatric Section PO Box 280 Rozelle 2039