

Your contribution

Should you wish to make a formal submission, please consider the questions below, noting that you do not have to respond to all of the questions, instead you may choose to respond to only some of them.

1. What are your suggestions to improve the Victorian community's understanding of mental illness and reduce stigma and discrimination?

2. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent mental illness and to support people to get early treatment and support?

3. What is already working well and what can be done better to prevent suicide?

4. What makes it hard for people to experience good mental health and what can be done to improve this? This may include how people find, access and experience mental health treatment and support and how services link with each other.

POVERTY
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
HOMELESSNESS
DIFFICULTY ACCESSING WELFARE SYSTEM
LACK OF AWARENESS OF SERVICES AVAILABLE
LONG WAITING LISTS TO ACCESS SERVICES

5. What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

6. What are the needs of family members and carers and what can be done better to support them?

7. What can be done to attract, retain and better support the mental health workforce, including peer support workers?

8. What are the opportunities in the Victorian community for people living with mental illness to improve their social and economic participation, and what needs to be done to realise these opportunities?

9. Thinking about what Victoria's mental health system should ideally look like, tell us what areas and reform ideas you would like the Royal Commission to prioritise for change?

10. What can be done now to prepare for changes to Victoria's mental health system and support improvements to last?

[Empty response area for question 10]

11. Is there anything else you would like to share with the Royal Commission?

[REDACTED] HAS BEEN MY DOCTOR FOR 36 YEARS. I HAVE ~~ASK~~ ASKED IF SHE COULD REPRESENT ME AS MY ADVOCATE, AND SHE HAS AGREED.

I AM USING A PSEUDONYM "MEG" IN THIS SUBMISSION, AND HAVE PROVIDED HER CONTACT DETAILS IN THE FORMAL SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

[REDACTED] IS HAPPY TO BE IDENTIFIED [REDACTED] *MAUR*

Privacy acknowledgement

I understand that the Royal Commission works with the assistance of its advisers and service providers. I agree that personal information about me and provided by me will be handled as described on the Privacy Page.

Yes No

Private and Confidential

"The evidence of people with lived experience"

**A Formal Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
(the Commission)**

1 July 2019

To The Commissioners:

Ms Penny Armytage, Chair of the Commission
Dr Alex Cockram
Professor Allan Fels AO
Professor Bernadette McSherry

To: The Premier, Mr Daniel Andrews
and
To: The Minister for Mental Health, Mr Martin Foley

Dear Commissioners, Mr Andrews and Mr Foley,

Thank you for giving Victorians the opportunity of sharing with you their experience and knowledge of the Mental Health system.

On 7 January 2019, I wrote a brief submission to the Commission in which I outlined some recommendations that the Commission could possibly consider in its Terms of Reference. I also provided a very brief outline of my story, my experience of the Mental Health system, covering near to four decades of my 63 years.

I would like to especially thank Mr Martin Foley for his response to my letter. Sent to my advocate, Dr [REDACTED] his sentiments and words meant so much. Thank you for your acknowledgement.

As I still currently wish to remain anonymous and do not wish to be identified, my doctor, Dr [REDACTED] will be submitting this statement to the Royal Commission on my behalf.

If you have any concerns or queries, please contact Dr [REDACTED] whose details can be found on the accompanying Covering Letter.

Thank you,

"Meg"

"Meg's" Story

It is almost impossible to express how difficult it has been to put my experience with the mental health system into words. The anguish in facing what happened to me has been virtually insurmountable. I have kept the torment of years of despair shut down deep within. I have confided in one close friend, who has also suffered with mental health issues, and with a few exceptionally insightful and compassionate medical professionals, of which Dr [REDACTED] is one. Other than that, my experience has been actively hidden, even though I feel the consequences of that experience every single day. I have kept it hidden because of the pain. I have kept it hidden because of the fear of it happening to me again, because of the fear of being judged, because of the fear of not being believed, because of the fear of being labelled 'crazy' or worse. And all these states of being are still fused together with trauma and a pain deep within.

My first contact with the Mental Health system came at about age 11. My mother had been ill for some time, but apart from some physical issues (from menopause), I wasn't sure what was wrong.

Life at home was difficult and stressful. My father was an alcoholic, and my parents struggled financially - largely because of that. Mum held down two jobs because she wanted to put food on the table and to make sure my brother and I received a good education. My father had limited capacities because he had been seriously injured in a mining accident at [REDACTED] almost two decades before I was born. I now realise that his drinking may perhaps have been a form of self-medication, to numb the physical and mental trauma of his accident. Dad eventually found work as a "Garbo" and street sweeper with the [REDACTED].

One day, in the winter of the mid 1960's, my older cousin came over to visit. My mother had been admitted to a hospital several days before. My brother and I were told that she had now been transferred to another hospital and that she wanted to see us. I remember walking from our home in [REDACTED]. It was cold and I felt frightened. My cousin held my hand tightly; she told me that everything was going to be okay. I wanted to believe her. It seemed like forever before we crossed the [REDACTED] bordering the [REDACTED] Psychiatric Hospital. We walked up the driveway entrance to a rather imposing building. Upon entering the building, we came upon another inner door which was locked. I remember the sound of keys and the heavy door opening into a space filled with screams. It scared me. I couldn't believe my mother was in this building. What was this place and why was my mother here?

We were ushered into a communal room where I saw my mother sitting quietly by the window. She seemed dazed, as if medicated. I just wanted to take her home, to take care of her. This was not going to happen.

It was some time before my mother came home. It was a difficult time. I felt like I had lost her. It was as if she had disappeared. My brother and I effectively began to look after ourselves. Two years older than me, my brother took a part time job to bring some money in. I took care of mum, cooked, cleaned, shopped, studied. I became insular. I stopped seeing friends, stopped playing sport, stopped feeling like a child.

My brother and I were good students. This was fortunate because it meant that Scholarships paid our way through our respective Catholic high schools. However, I soon began to feel the strain of many burdens. My father found our new 'normal' difficult. His drinking worsened; and I found myself on the receiving end of his anger. "Stupid, ugly and not deserving to eat the food from his table" became a daily abuse. I wanted my mother back. This was not going to happen.

When I turned 16, I made the decision to leave school. We needed the money. I had just completed Form 4 (Year 10), and the nuns advised on several jobs that might suit. I settled on a position with the Public Service. After passing the Public Service Test and the Hansard Test on first attempt, I quickly became an assistant to the Personnel Manager within a Federal Government Department. However, after 12 months, I wanted to return to study. I decided not to restore my Catholic Scholarship, choosing instead to go to a local public high school. This turned out to be such a good decision; it turned out to be so much better an environment for me given my situation at home. Several teachers intuitively saw something in me and challenged and encouraged me on many levels. Thanks to them, I did very well in my Higher School Certificate exam (Year 12), and was awarded a Scholarship to university.

I had several offers from a number of universities before settling on the Creative Arts. Drama, music, film - these were subjects that freed my mind and helped me cope with my past and my present. I loved my course. It was difficult though, the hours were long and my responsibilities at home were increasing.

My father retired in my second year. He was lost without his work routine, and his drinking worsened. We began to argue with increasing frequency. I was at a loss as to how to manage his increasingly difficult and aggressive behaviour. Then one day he had a massive stroke. This resulted in the loss of his short-term memory and the development of other neurological issues, so the doctors advised it best that he be placed in formal care.

My father ended up in a nursing home; and within two years I ended up in [REDACTED] Psychiatric Unit.

It's puzzling, but once dad left, I found myself utterly exhausted.

In order to get everything done at home as well as study, I was only sleeping a couple of hours a day. It was as if I couldn't stop and then suddenly, when some of my burdens had eased (with dad going into care), I realised how spent I was. Unable to break the cycle of extreme anxiety and stress, sleep deprived and losing weight, friends of the family suggested I come and stay with them for some respite.

My brother who had left home a few years earlier, returned to take care of mum. It was difficult for me to take up the offer of a break because I was always worried about her. Guilt followed me.

Finding myself in a household where people did normal things, ate what they wanted whenever they wanted, had visitors and a social life, was a shock to me; it was a life so far removed from my own as it had become, that I realised I needed some help.

My friend's mother organised for me to see a psychiatrist as an outpatient. I found this difficult. Talking about myself was not natural. I had spent years not revealing, hiding my day to day family dysfunction – as well as my inner world.

During one of my visits, the doctor noticed that I wasn't well. My blood pressure was extremely elevated, my feet and legs swollen. I was urgently admitted to the [REDACTED] Hospital in [REDACTED].

[REDACTED] Hospital

It was early 1980, January possibly February, when I was admitted to the [REDACTED] Hospital. I was assessed as suffering from fluid retention due to extreme protein deficiency. I had put on a lot of weight from fluid in a short amount of time and this was placing a strain on my heart. I was immediately put on diuretics and told to rest as much as possible.

I quickly began feeling better. I was sleeping and eating. The chef at the hospital went out of his way to cook me up special vegetarian meals as the hospital did not cater for vegetarians back then. My meals were the envy of the other patients in the ward.

Medical students took a special interest in my case; I found them to be sensitive and caring, despite all the prodding!

To this day though, I was not sure how I was classified or what diagnosis was made by the outpatient psychiatrist I was seeing prior to being admitted to [REDACTED]. I recall however, that after a few days of rest, a doctor came to see me to advise that the hospital's inpatient mental health ward was full, so would I be amenable to going to the [REDACTED] Psychiatric Unit for ongoing treatment. I asked several times if I could stay there at [REDACTED], as the thought of moving to another hospital made me feel somewhat anxious.

Picking up on my apprehension, the doctor explained that the psychiatric ward (at [REDACTED]) had a long waiting list. He assured me that [REDACTED] would assist my physical as well as psychological recovery. Not really knowing what to do or what the alternatives were, I agreed to be transferred to [REDACTED] as a voluntary patient.

Psychiatric Unit

It was late in the afternoon when I was transferred from [REDACTED] to [REDACTED]. By the time I arrived, the residents at [REDACTED] had settled down for the night. The place was quiet, it felt deserted. I remember thinking I couldn't get a sense of the place, which was unsettling. I was introduced to Dr J, who advised that he would be the doctor taking care of me while I was there. I was given a physical examination, I was weighed, notes were taken, questions were asked (did I throw up? – No; did I exercise immediately after a meal? – No; did I binge eat? - No). I was shown to a room with several beds and allocated the empty one. Sleep did not come.

In the morning, I was taken through the routine of how things worked at [REDACTED]. Life was pretty regimented. I didn't mind that, I liked order. Group therapy sessions happened on a regular basis, with both inpatients and outpatients attending. These sessions were usually conducted by one of the male nurses. I did a lot of listening. It was a revelation (and sadly, also a comfort), for me to know that there were other people with apprehensions, anxieties and fears – with troubled histories.

The nurses at [REDACTED] were easy going, and chatting to them on a casual basis was easy. Some knew a lot about music, which was one of my interests.

One on one consultations with Dr J, were also regularly scheduled.

Occasionally, I was told to attend a session with Dr K, Dr J's supervisor. From the first meeting Dr K made me feel very uneasy. I always had a sense of disquiet around him.

The afternoons at [REDACTED] were not always structured. I used these days to occasionally go for walks, to clear my mind, to get some fresh air. Walking had always been part of my life as nobody in my family had a car so we were a family of walkers. I cannot emphasise enough how important my excursions were for me. One of the kind ladies in the cafeteria whom I got to know quite well, understood that I was required to put on weight, so she would package up some slices of raisin toast and a piece of fruit for me to snack on during the day.

Dr J would occasionally see me come and go from the facility grounds. I didn't think anything of it. It was meditation and therapy for me and also helped with my asthma. I didn't realise that this simple pleasure would turn out to be misconstrued as something for which I was to be punished.

Dr J decided that he and I should have a contract. My obligation was to put on weight, even if only slowly, and that I was going to be weighed regularly to make sure that I upheld my end of the bargain. I'm not sure what his obligation was, but regardless, I upheld my end of this contract.

I recall two other specific incidences at [REDACTED] that now, in hindsight, may have had some significance on what was to happen to me.

On one particular afternoon, after I had been at the Unit for some time, I was told to attend the office of Dr K. As mentioned, he made me feel uneasy, so I was always guarded when in his presence. On this occasion I recall that shortly after entering the room, I heard a noise coming from behind a two-way viewing mirror. I asked whether there was anybody in the next room, looking on and listening in to our conversation. I wasn't rude, but I think he was affronted by my question. Perhaps it was not my place to query, but I could distinctly see vague figures through the mirror, moving about in the next room. He abruptly told me that nobody was there.

I have always found it extremely difficult to talk about myself, to talk about my issues and my family situation to others. If I was to do so, I needed the reassurance that what I was saying was private; or at the very least, asked permission if I minded that student doctors were listening. He got angry with me and again denied that anybody was there. The session ended. I left the room, but stayed in

the corridor, distressed by what had just happened. I then saw what looked like young medical students come out of the room behind the two-way mirror. I no longer trusted Dr K.

When I was at [REDACTED] my permission was always sought before any student doctor was allowed to speak to or exam me. I appreciated that respect.

The second incident centred around a request that I undertake a 'neurological' test. I think I was told it was to check for brain damage (from the period of high blood pressure from the protein deficiency). I wasn't sure whether or not this was true, but because I desperately didn't want to be told I had brain damage, I made a point of trying really hard not to fail the test.

Sometime after I had done the exam, one of the nurses came up to me and told me to be careful. I had no idea what he meant. He asked me if I knew about MENSA. I told him I didn't. When he explained, I told him it sounded elitist. He told me that my results had come back very high, and again repeated that I should be careful.

I think, now, that prior to taking the test, a decision had already been made by the powers that be about what they intended to do with me.

In Hindsight:

The one thing that I am now acutely aware of in relation to my time at [REDACTED] (and [REDACTED]), is that nobody actually told me what was going on. It seemed that people spoke to me in riddles, as if I was inherently to know what they meant, as if I was inherently to know how this maze of a system worked.

This was my life, my present and my future that they were making decisions about and not once did anybody bother to tell me what was happening, what they were doing to me and why.

My psychological issues, the reasons behind my anxiety, stress, depression, OCD and weight loss were never dealt with. I don't even know to what extent these issues were diagnosed or on their radar.

[REDACTED] Psychiatric Hospital

That autumn morning in May 1980, was mild and sunny.

It was a friend's birthday and I wondered how she would celebrate and if she would be upset that I hadn't sent her a card with my best wishes.

I don't recall the day being particularly significant, the usual pattern within the Unit continued on as normal. Dr J was away, I was told.

Regardless, I continued observing and meeting the requirements of our contract.

I thought about going for a walk that afternoon, but the weather had turned and it looked like it was about to rain. As it was nearing dinner time, I headed down to the cafeteria to have a quick chat to the cook. As I was making my way down the corridor towards the dining room, two men approached me.

The suddenness of what happened next, has left some of my recollections in a jumble. But the memories are still there. I can't recall for instance who the men were, or where they were from. Each stood either side of me and grabbed my arms. I remember being told to get my things because I was being taken to [REDACTED]. They said I was being Certified.

The kind lady from the cafeteria on hearing the commotion (other patients had begun to gather around me) rushed out to the corridor. I recall seeing her distress, it was as if it mirrored my own. She rushed back into the dining room before emerging with two slices of raisin toast wrapped in foil.

She came over to me and placed her hand over my hand reassuringly, before letting go and leaving me with the wrapped toast. I thanked her.

I was told to go and gather my possessions. As these were few, it didn't take me long despite my incredible agitation.

I repeatedly told them that I wanted to speak to Dr J. I didn't understand what was really going on or why. I told them that Dr J and I had a contract that I had abided by. Was he aware of what was going on, I recall asking. No answer was forthcoming. I asked this question repeatedly. No answer.

I don't remember how I got to [REDACTED] late that afternoon in May, 1980.

I don't recall if we walked, or if I was driven. Such was my distress. I have a very good memory, but extreme stress can sometimes leave gaps; and at other times, it can render memories in stone.

It was early evening by the time I was being admitted to the [REDACTED] Psychiatric Hospital. I remember telling the person I was left with that my being there was a mistake, that Dr J was away, but when he returned, he would sort things out.

I was told that there would be a meeting the next morning about my case. I asked if I could call my brother so that he could be there with me. I was granted this request. When I spoke to my brother, I was in an extremely distressed state. I told him where I was and about the meeting. I asked him to please come and sort it out with the doctors so that I could come home.

After the phone call, I was shown to a room in the open ward section of the hospital. Patients were already in bed, asleep by this time. I was hungry and dehydrated. I had not eaten anything since lunchtime. I had not been given anything to eat or drink by the staff at [REDACTED].

I changed into my nightie and sat on the bed, feeling utter despair.

From the dim light coming in from the corridor, I could see a trail of ants winding their way across the floor – indifferent to their surroundings. I hated ants. It's a terrible phobia associated with my childhood. The rain had set in and I could hear it pound on the roof. I was hungry. I then remembered the raisin toast. I carefully unwrapped the foil, not wanting to make any noise in case I woke somebody. I took a slice and ate it. I began sobbing, as the rain pelted down.

This memory is as clear to me now, as if it had happened today.

The Next Day

I hadn't slept. I was the first to rise. I managed to find my way to the bathroom. I was soon joined by another patient. We exchanged an awkward nod. The young woman asked about my situation. I told her that I wasn't staying, that there had been a mistake which was going to be sorted in a few hours. In hindsight, I can see how cliched and funny my language was but it was a Kafkaesque situation and for me, deadly serious, and about to get worse. As impossible as that sounds.

The young woman looked at me with a wry smile and said: "The problem with you is that you haven't learned how to play the game."

I didn't understand what she meant. I never saw her again.

Certification Meeting

It was about mid-morning. I was anxiously waiting for my brother to arrive. I sat patiently in a communal room until I was called. From the doorway, I saw my brother. Mum had come too. I couldn't believe she had come.

I was concerned that she may have been affected by her experiences with this place.

But I was so happy to see them. So very thankful.

We were soon called into the meeting.

It was a room with a large table.

Dr K was there, and a few other people. There was some discussion about my situation. I remember being asked some questions. I can't remember exactly what these were, but I had a sense that they pertained to my cognitive capacity. I do vividly recall however, that one older man, whom I took to be a senior doctor from [REDACTED] wasn't happy about my being Certified.

I remember at some point that I mentioned that Dr J had me sign a contract. It was a contract that I had not broken.

Twenty-four hours before, I was a voluntary patient.

Twenty-four hours before, I was doing all that was asked of me.

There was some back and forth between Dr K and the other senior doctor. It seemed to me that Dr K was pressuring the other doctor to concur with his medical opinion for Certification. I thought it was strange that a doctor from [REDACTED] Psych Unit had power, or was attempting to exert power, over a doctor from [REDACTED].

There were documents on the table.

My present and future was sealed.

I have lost some of the details of this meeting because of the incorrect, unexpected and catastrophic outcome.

At the conclusion of the meeting, I begged my brother not to leave me there.

He reassured me a number of times that he would come back for me.

His words were my only hope. It was a hope I clung to, that kept me going.

[REDACTED]

Almost immediately, I was taken from the open ward to the closed ward at [REDACTED] Psychiatric Hospital. It was inconceivable to me that this was actually happening. I kept thinking I was going to wake from a bad dream, that this could not possibly be real.

I remembered that cold winter's day many years ago when I had made this same journey to see my mother. [REDACTED] had not changed.

I was taken to a single room not far from the Nursing Station. I was told to change and get into bed. The Head Nurse came in to introduce himself. I can't remember his name, but I remember everything else about him.

One of the first things they did was tell me that I could no longer have any of my personal possessions. They took my toiletries, my clothing, my underwear. A nightgown was thrown onto the bed and I was told to change into it. I recall asking if I could at least keep my toothbrush. No, was the reply.

I remember feeling apprehensive and fearful.

I was again told to change. I gathered my possessions together and placed them on the bed in a bundle. I then removed my clothing and changed into the nightgown that they had provided.

As I went to pick up the nightie, I felt a shiver come over me. It looked familiar. I picked it up and looked at the back of the collar. It still had my mother's name on it. I had labelled it for mum over a decade ago, so it wouldn't get lost in the [REDACTED] hospital system. I don't know how it found its way back to me. Was it accidental or malicious?

Regardless, the impact was devastating. Agitated and overwhelmed, I crawled into the bed.

On reflection, the irony was that I was actually left with the most personal of items. They had taken everything else from me.

Around this initial period, a hospital psychologist came to see me.

He was on an administrative mission. He wanted to transfer me from Sickness Benefits to the Invalid Pension. I thanked him for his consideration but I told him that I wasn't an invalid and wasn't going to be an invalid, so it wouldn't be of any use to me. He told me that it would just make life easier. I explained that my brother was coming soon to get me out.

We then had a brief chat about my situation. He listened intently. I also explained that my possessions had been taken from me and that my immediate worry was that I was left without my toothpaste and toothbrush. This was a serious issue for me, amongst many other serious issues.

He told me that I had the option of writing a letter regarding my concerns. He provided me with a pen and paper and told me that he'd return in a short while to pick it up.

I carefully outlined my circumstances, from my voluntary admission to [REDACTED] Psych Unit leading up to my incarceration at [REDACTED]. I carefully outlined how I had fulfilled all my obligations and that I had at all times behaved respectfully, quietly and courteously. I wrote that I believed a mistake had occurred and that I should not have been Certified. I also detailed concerns I had about having my personal belongings taken away from me, including my personal hygiene products. I said that nothing had been explained to me, that things were being done to me without just cause. I asked for help.

The psychologist returned some time later and I handed him my letter. He quickly scanned it. He told me that he would send it off. I don't recall ever seeing him again.

To this day, I don't know what happened to that letter. I have sometimes wondered whether it had been lost, misplaced. Or whether it had, in fact, been the trigger for the hell that was about to be unleashed upon me.

The Room at the End of the Corridor

The Head Nurse came in to see me. He told me to get up as I was going to be transferred to another room.

I followed him down to the far end of the corridor to a room not too dissimilar to the one I had just left. It contained a single bed and a side cabinet. I thought it a bit darker than the previous room, but it had the advantage of being situated right next to the bathroom. It was quieter too.

I was told to get into the bed. I again asked about my toiletries. I didn't get a response. He left.

He returned shortly after with my meal. He told me that I could have some of my possessions back when I put on weight. I looked at the meal, steamed broccoli and cauliflower with some sort of sauce. I told him that putting on weight with that sort of meal was going to be difficult, and that I was anxious about how I was meant to get a nutritional outcome.

He left.

The Head Nurse scared me.

The next thing I remember is hearing the sound of loud banging coming from outside my room. I turned to see a person nailing wooden planks across the window, shutting out the light. The room got darker. Shortly after, the door to my room was completely blacked out with what looked like heavy fabric.

Fear overwhelmed me and I recall that I began to shake uncontrollably. The shaking was unusual for me and it shocked me.

The Head Nurse returned and told me that I was going to be left in this room, in darkness, until I reached 56 kilograms.

I was given more instructions, orders that sounded like threats.

I was told that I was no longer allowed to use the bathroom. I was no longer allowed to wash or shower. No longer allowed to use the toilet. He placed a pan at the end of the bed.

I was not allowed to make any phone calls. I was not allowed visitors. Staff were ordered not to speak to me unless it was absolutely necessary.

I was only allowed out of the bed to use the pan.

The door was to be kept locked at all times.

I told him that he couldn't do this, that he was not allowed to do this.

"My brother's coming to get me out of here", I said.

"No, he's not. Your brother doesn't care about you. We can do whatever we want to you and nobody will care", he replied.

This exchange has never left me. It caused, and still causes, immeasurable trauma and pain.

I struggled to hold it together. My brother was my only hope and I found myself slipping away.

Left in darkness, I wept.

Lost in Darkness and Time

I was put on a medication called [REDACTED] It made me feel ill.

I recall telling one of the nurses that the medication I was being given made me feel sick. I was having difficulty breathing and I was experiencing tremors. I was initially diagnosed with asthma as a child. I was worried that the medication was causing me harm.

The Head Nurse came to see me.

He told me to stop complaining, that I didn't have any rights.

He told me that I was under State 'care', and that, "*We own you.*"

He said that if I didn't do as I was told, he would have one of the other male nurses rape me.

I knew him to be a cruel man. I believed him. I was determined not to show him my distress.

"I've written a letter", I said.

He interrupted, telling me the letter had never reached its destination.

I knew he had total control over me and my situation.

I was terrified, and began to feel constant dread.

I couldn't trust any of the other staff, for fear that if I confided anything to any one of them, word would get back to the Head Nurse and I would be further punished, threatened or worse.

These early days were a blur. I lost my sense of time. I drifted in and out of sleep - but always in darkness. I didn't care about eating. I didn't care about anything. I was overcome with a sense of futility. I was traumatised and emotionally numb.

How was it possible that medical professionals could put a person in a room where one could not distinguish night from day, where time lost its grounding, its essence, and became a form of endless torture? All this was done to me, forced upon me, with threats rather than explanations.

I felt myself dying here. I would die and nobody would know.

I would never see my mother again. I would never see my brother again.

My Weight

Just a week earlier, while at the [REDACTED] Psych Unit, I was spending the afternoons out walking in the crisp cold of late autumn, surrounded by nature, by trees, by birds, by life. I remember thinking that I needed to make a trip into the city to buy a new pair of jeans because the ones I was wearing were becoming tight on me. I wasn't sure what my weight was, so my clothes were my only gauge that I was putting on weight.

None of the nurses, either at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] ever told me what my actual weight was. At [REDACTED] I was only told during my regular weigh-ins, that my weight was slowly increasing. Which was good, they said.

When I was initially admitted to [REDACTED], my weight had ballooned rapidly from fluid retention. The medical staff wanted it gone just as quickly. I was told about the importance of eating a certain amount of protein each day in order to avoid a repeat of the presenting edema.

And now here I was, in a place with conditions worse than a prison, being told that I have no rights, no freedom, no safety. Set an impossible task to put on weight by eating steamed vegetables.

I felt myself dying here. A singular sentence that kept repeating: "I feel like I'm dying".

The Birds

I must have been asleep when I opened my eyes to the sound of birds.

My darkness shifted a little. It must be morning, I thought.

My room had been filled with so much silence that all I recall hearing was my own difficult breaths.

The chirping chatter resonated from just outside my boarded-up window.

It was daybreak. I was given time.

I sat upright and actually said aloud: "It's morning".

In that split second, I knew that I needed to get out of this horror. How? I needed a daily schedule to follow. My thoughts had been captured by the brutality of my situation. I needed to shift my thinking in order to take some control of myself again.

And I needed to put on weight. I needed to put on weight in an environment and in a system not conducive to putting on weight; in a system that actively shamed me, denigrated me, and physically and psychologically harmed me.

It was a system in which I struggled to retain my sanity. It was a system of violent and irrational confinement, thinly veiled as a '*unique and personalised treatment*'.

To this day, I am of the belief that what was done to me had absolutely no medical grounding. To this day, I have ruminated on whether what was done to me was in fact a punishment, instigated through multiple acts of malice, or a bizarre form of experimental hubris – or both.

What I do know is, if I had not acted against the madness of this system, I would have died in that room.

But to say that I have survived does not reflect the life that I have lost, or the suffering that I have lived since.

The Milk Act

When I was in my mid-teens, I caught the mumps. I was extremely ill and bed bound for near to two weeks. Unable to chew, my doctor suggested I have a vitamin & protein enriched milk drink. Made with a powder akin to Sustagen, it was mixed with whole milk.

I don't know exactly when I asked, because I was afraid to ask. So, it was with some trepidation that I tentatively mentioned to one of the nurses whether it was possible to have a specially made up protein milk drink instead of steamed vegetables. It would help me in my task of putting on weight, I said.

The nurse left, before returning to advise that the hospital was not going to provide the protein drink and that if I was wanting something special it would have to come out of the money that they held for me in trust. As I was receiving Sickness Benefits, I gave my permission.

For the next weeks/months, this drink was to become my breakfast, lunch and dinner.

My Routine

I didn't know what day it was. I didn't count days. My objective was to just get through the day with some degree of purpose. I did not want to lose my mind.

It was to become my daily routine – bathroom, shower, brush teeth, comb hair. Make the bed, tidy up, have breakfast, read the papers, have morning tea, go for a walk, have lunch, write, have afternoon tea, dinner, brush my teeth and then sleep.

I was going to go through these rituals every day, *in my head*. I was determined not to lose my sense of time. Instead of losing my mind and my sense of reality, I was going to write a book.

I was determined I was not going to let them know how terrified I was - of them, of what they were doing to me, of their violence and brutality.

The next thing I tried to do was to identify footsteps. I tried to make out who the nurses were that passed by my room. Or patients perhaps. If I identified a pattern, I would allocate a name. This kept me busy.

The nurses that came and went from my room never spoke to me other than to ask me to hop on the scales.

I don't recall receiving any visits from any doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist. It was as if I didn't exist save for the scales.

The Dentist

My existence was bound to my solitary, internal routine. This was not to say that depression had not taken hold.

The words, *"Your brother doesn't care about you"* and *"We can do whatever we want to you and nobody will care"*, continually played with my thinking.

My inability to wash was beginning to impact on my skin, my hair, my eyes, my teeth. The lack of light, the lack of fresh air, my inability to move, save to the pan at the end of my bed.

The daily isolation, bereft of social contact.

The increasing grief felt on being told that my brother had not come for me.

My inability to brush my teeth.

I began to feel the consequences of my reality.

I began to feel the consequences of a cruel and violent system that had failed me.

Days had passed, weeks perhaps. I had begun to experience increasing tooth and gum pain. I recall asking one of the nurses whether I could please see a dentist. My requests were ignored. But the excruciating level of pain made me persist, despite my fears of threats or reprisals.

I was eventually told that I could see the hospital dentist.

I was escorted by a nurse, out of my room, out of the locked ward, and out into the blinding daylight. I remember recoiling as the sun hit my face. I felt pain as my eyes attempted to adjust. I stumbled, unsteady and weak.

I was overcome by the enormity of presenting to a dentist not having washed or brushed my teeth for who knows how long. I was overcome by the weight of physical and emotional exhaustion.

As I sat in the chair of a pristine dentist's room, the irony of my circumstances and my appearance was not lost on me.

I think I fell asleep, such was the level of my extreme fatigue. I recall being told that my teeth were a mess and that I had a gum infection. This did not surprise me. The dentist may have told me other things, I just couldn't remember.

I don't recall if I received treatment, or even if I was given antibiotics to treat the infection.

What I do recall however, is that despite my dental visit, the terms of my confinement had not changed.

And, I was still not given my toothbrush, despite my teeth still hurting.

The Grand Round

I wondered, as I sat in my tortured silence, whether I would ever be, could ever be, the same.

I found my thoughts shifting again. I thought that perhaps, given the state of my teeth, given the state of me, that the dentist might have said something to someone, anyone, that might have freed me from this prison. This was not to be.

My thoughts darkened and I struggled to hold on to my routines.

In the midst of this declining state, a nurse came in and ordered me out of bed.

Unbeknown to me however, this place was not done with me yet.

I was worried. I was not told what was happening or where I was being taken.

I was led out of [REDACTED] I was scared.

The harsh light of day caused me to flinch from pain.

I was still in the same nightgown I was given on the first day of arrival. My mother's nightgown. I don't recall having been given slippers.

I was taken to another building, and then led into a large auditorium filled with people.

This shocked me, all these people shocked me.

Upon entering, I wanted to turn and run. I wanted to get out of there.

I was steered up the stairs to the top of the stage. A chair, I think it was a wooden chair, was positioned to the right, facing the people, at a slight angle.

I was told to go over and sit.

I remember walking over to the chair, trying to hold myself upright. I did not want anyone there to see through me, to see my fear, to see my humiliation.

When I sat, I remember brushing down my nightie so that it covered as much of me as possible. I tried not to look at anyone.

I remembered sitting there, unwashed, hair thick with oil, skin flaking, breath stinking.

A man to the left of me, a man I'd not seen before, walked up to a microphone and began to address the people. I had absolutely no idea what was happening until he began to speak.

Against my better judgement, I took a quick glimpse of the crowd. I saw a face I recognised. There may have been others, but his was the face I immediately saw, Dr J.

He was looking directly at me. I stared coldly back at him before looking back down at the floor.

The man to the left of me, the man with the microphone, was talking about me. He talked about me as if I were an object, a specimen, an experiment. He talked about me as if I wasn't there.

I recalled, when back at [REDACTED], I was so distressed when I realised medical students had been listening in to a private session I had been having with Dr K. That happened without my knowledge, without my consent.

Now, they didn't need such consent. Here, there was no need to protect me from their disregard, their disrespect, their absolute control.

All was hidden at [REDACTED] now something was in plain sight, but in appearance only.

Questions were asked of me, but I can't remember what they were, or if I said anything.

What could I say? For a split second, I thought that perhaps I could yell out for help. But as was the case with my confinement, I was always on alert, and I was always afraid. This state of being was exhausting.

If moments presented themselves as opportunities for me, like this exposed forum, then from my experience here, it was also presented as a provocation, like a trap that led to more punishment. Who would believe me?

So I did not ask this den of eyes for help.

When the ordeal was over, I was led back to [REDACTED].

The Unlocked Door

The days in my room continued. I drank my meals, used the pan, was weighed. My door was locked, unlocked and locked again

My routines dragged on from one day to another, endlessly.

Then one night, I woke to the sound of keys, to the sound of the door to my room being unlocked. This was unusual and I remember steeling myself. I listened and heard nothing. I looked over at the direction of the door but could not see anything. I waited, in a readied state for a long time, but nothing happened. I wondered whether one of the nurses had made a mistake, unlocking my door in error. Perhaps I had imagined it. Or perhaps not. It might be a test, I thought. There might be a nurse just outside the door, waiting to see what I would do. And if I opened the door, and got caught, I would be punished.

I slowly sat upright in the bed. I waited. I shifted myself out from the covers and stood there silently for a while, wondering if the sound of my breathing could be heard through the unopened door. I walked cautiously to the foot of my bed and then reached in the direction of the door. It was still unlocked.

I opened the door and just stood there with the dim lights from the corridor shining in my face.

What was I going to do, I thought. I could just return to bed; or I could make a dash for the bathroom.

I made a dash for the bathroom.

My heart was pounding, I was terrified. On catching sight of my dishevelled figure in the mirror, I startled myself.

I was gone for all of a few minutes, or at least, that's what it seemed like to me. My sense of time had shifted. But it was just long enough to let the water wash over me, as I sobbed uncontrollably.

And then I was back in bed. Clean.

To this day, I don't know whether that unlocked door was an act of kindness from a nurse who felt some compassion, or whether it was a mistake, or whether it was a test.

Wimbledon Replay

I lay awake all night, that night of my shower. I thought that surely one of the nurses would have figured out what I had done. But the days continued, on and on.

Then one day, a nurse told me I could spend some time outside my room.

I didn't know what to do.

I followed him out of my room and then just stood there, in the corridor, wondering what I should do next. I was trying to get my bearings. Had I reached 56 kilograms? Or had something else happened?

As with everything, nobody told me anything.

I was glad I had showered.

I tentatively made my way down the corridor, past the initial room they had put me in, past the Nursing Station. I could hear chatter and noises and made my way towards them, overwhelmed.

Patients were gathered around a television that was showing a replay of a Wimbledon tennis match. I walked over to one of the chairs in what looked like a communal living area, and sat. I was overcome by the fact that I was sitting here, with other patients, alive.

My mind had been so committed to dealing with the possibility that I would die in that room, that I would not ever leave, that to be out amongst others, although 'inmates' like me, was difficult to deal with. I felt as if I was observing, not really present. I felt as if the moment was washing over me, that it wasn't real.

While I was sitting there, an older man came over and sat next to me. I nodded, acknowledging him. We were silent for some time before he spoke.

I'm not sure whether or not what I was told by this person was the truth, but in that moment, as he spoke to me, I believed him. I was shaken by his words.

He told me that he would walk past my room every day and stand a while outside my door, thinking positive thoughts for me.

He told me that he had been a senior doctor at [REDACTED], and that he was now a patient being treated for alcoholism.

He told me that he had been made aware of what was being done to me by one of the nurses who he knew well.

He told me that he thought that I would die in that room, that I would not come out alive, that what had been done to me was wrong, was criminal.

I listened to him intently. He sharpened my focus. I had not spoken a word to anybody, and yet here was another patient who seemed to know more about what was going on, than me.

He was intelligent and articulate. I had no grounds to doubt him.

I was allowed out of my room again the next day.

I was given an item of clothing to change into, given my toothbrush, allowed to wash.

The boards on the window to my room were not removed.

Open Ward

I was told that I was going back to the Open Ward. I packed my toiletries and my mother's nightgown. I left [REDACTED] with these possessions and my trauma.

I was told that I was still Certified and that if I got any funny ideas or did a runner, they would send the police for me. I understood.

In the Open Ward, I think I was taken to a different room to that given to me on that first night back in May.

It was a room already occupied by several other women, women who had been patients here for quite some time. This made me feel agitated, the knowledge that they had been here for 'quite some time'. This did not sit well with me at all.

I was worried about what lay in store for me.

The women with whom I shared were friendly and kind. This was of great solace. There was no judgement here.

But I had to leave this place, the place that had become the centre and source of my mental anguish.

I also had a number of physical issues to deal with, the material results of my 'treatment'. It seemed that there had been little regard for what consequences would flow from that 'treatment'.

While I was in the room at the end of the corridor in [REDACTED] I do not recall having had any visits from a doctor, a psychologist, a psychiatrist. And I do not recall having been checked for any physical concerns that may have resulted from my torturous confinement.

During my time in that room, I do not recall anyone ever coming to ask me how I was, how I was coping, how I was feeling. I do not recall anyone even acknowledging me. No one had even said hello.

I had been harmed physically, emotionally and psychologically and the depth of that harm had to be negotiated carefully in this Open Ward, by me, for fear that I would only end up back in that place, that hell, that I had just come from.

So I navigated the basics, to make it appear that I had 'my life' under control, while still under their control. I navigated the basics to make it appear that I was 'happy'.

Concerned about the pain and sores on my head, a visit to the hospital hairdresser revealed that my scalp was covered in psoriasis and scabs. This condition covered my hairline, to the back of my neck, travelling all the way down my back. It is a condition I still suffer from today.

Despite the stresses of my childhood, I had been a teenager blessed with good skin, thick shining hair, clear eyes.

But my teeth and gums now ached. My eyes had become sensitive to the light, my feet and legs hurt. My skin was covered with rashes, my head with scabs. Sounds jarred me.

But I was 'happy', ready to leave.

Trial Leave

The conditions of my release had been set. I was to report back to Dr J, who had been promoted. Or so I was told.

It was called Trial Leave, a form of probation, where I had to make regular visits to see him, to let him know how well the 'treatment' had succeeded in making me 'whole again'.

I was told that if I missed a visit, I would be picked up by the police and returned to that room.

I understood.

And so it was that I left [REDACTED] with my toothbrush, my trauma and someone else's clothes.

Consequences

When I left [REDACTED] that day, I was unable to go home. I couldn't go home.

One particular conversation with [REDACTED] Head Nurse plagued me.

"My brother's coming to get me out of here", I said. "No, he's not. Your brother doesn't care about you. We can do whatever we want to you and nobody will care", he replied.

When he spoke those words to me, he caused me immeasurable pain. I believed that my brother had betrayed me.

However, the Head Nurse had lied to me.

Because of the extreme level of agitation and anxiety I was suffering, I believed him. Fear made me less rational. But the damage had been done. It damaged my relationship with my brother for just

over two decades. It took me a long time to ask. It took a major health crisis and his near death, for me to ask. It was not until 2001, that my brother responded to my query about why he had not come for me.

What I eventually discovered was that shortly after my Certification, my brother had come to the hospital to visit me, to see what he could do to help me. But they would not allow me to see him. They had advised him that I was receiving 'treatment', that they were 'saving my life'.

I was never told of his visit.

They lied to me, and they lied to him.

But in 1980 I didn't know that. And on my release, I was suffering from hypervigilance, trauma and despair.

I was unable to go home. I couldn't go home. I was in shock.

Before leaving the hospital, I was given the balance of what was left of my Sickness Benefits. I used this money to stay in a hotel for a couple of nights.

I needed time. I needed to figure out what I was going to do. I was not in a good place. Maybe, because of what had been done to me, I began to walk around at night, sleeping during the day. It was as if I could no longer bear daylight.

At some point, I rang my mother and told her that I was out of the hospital. I told her that I just needed a few days to myself. But mum wanted me home.

It was not long after my return, that mum sensed that something was very wrong. She didn't know what to do to help me. She contacted a family friend, a most wonderful, elderly woman who was a retired dentist. We met. I was incapable of telling her or anyone else what had happened, what I was feeling. It was fear. A fear, and an overwhelming uncertainty, that has not left me. That has never left me. She was a woman with immense humanity and insight. A holocaust survivor, she immediately sensed that I was suicidal. Such an irony given that I'd fought so hard to survive

She made me promise not to do anything. She made me promise, for my mother, and in my mother's name.

She arranged for me to go and stay with some good people that she knew, who generously offered the use of a granny flat in regional Victoria.

Here I rested, thought, and whenever possible, tried to walk. I kept to myself.

But my immediate struggles surrounded my physical health, some of the consequences of my forced confinement.

I suffered with serious mouth infections and abscesses. I suffered with cellulitis of the legs and feet, an excruciating inflammation that made it difficult for me to walk. These issues continued for years after my release from hospital. At one stage, the Dental Hospital wanted to extract all my teeth, such was the state of their decay. I was living on a diet of antibiotics, in an attempt to stave off hospitalisation.

Conditional Release

When I was first allowed out of my incarceration in [REDACTED] I was given someone else's clothes to wear, a dress that had originally been black but was now a faded charcoal. I wondered about its history, which was soon to become mine. I wore it all the time. It was oversized, shift like. This

allowed me to hide my humiliation, my rashes, my cellulitis. Conditions I never had before [REDACTED] I hated that dress.

I checked myself before knocking on the door. I think he was growing a beard. If only I could hide my face like that, I thought. Dr J asked me to sit. It was a room filled with light, too much light. I shifted my chair so that I was out of the direct rays that were streaming into the room. Silence. I don't know what he was thinking as I was sitting there in that charcoal dress.

It was oppressive, being in the same room as him.

The time dragged on that afternoon. I don't recall the specifics of his questions, but I do remember them being superficial, meaningless. I was filled with so many emotions, and yet I spoke of none of them. Fear. Fear of him, fear of the System, fear of its cruelty, fear of that room. Fear of still being Certified. I waited for him to explain why he broke our contract. I waited for him to explain why they had done what they had done to me. I waited for him to explain why I had been Certified. I waited.

I was angry.

I left, still on 'parole'.

He had made no mention of why I was incarcerated. He made no mention of why I was left in darkness, why I was not allowed to wash, why I was not allowed to move, why I was repeatedly threatened. He made no mention.

I returned again and again for these meetings. He made no mention.

And so it was that I was finally released, with no mention.

I was a victim of the System. I had become subservient to the System. And he had no insight.

There is something very wrong with a System that you allow to continually torture you in order to survive that System.

April [REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] I read an article in the local paper that said a community group had been set up to try and save the [REDACTED] Psychiatric Hospital from developers.

My history with that place was such that I couldn't understand why anybody would bother trying to save it.

I actually love old buildings, but [REDACTED] was filled with so many horrors.

Strangely and unexpectedly, I felt the need to go and see it. I asked a friend to go with me for support.

It was a mild autumn day in April [REDACTED] I felt apprehension as the train pulled up at the station near to the hospital. The short walk to [REDACTED] was difficult. Memories flooded back of the number of times I had made this journey, different times, different emotions.

I stood out the front of [REDACTED] for quite some time. But it was the back of the building that held my interest, held me.

As I walked around towards the back, I noticed how unkept it was. The gardeners had long gone and weeds had finally decided upon their own order. I made my way around some bushes when I came upon a window at the far end of the building.

I stopped. A cold tremor came upon me and I found myself tearing up. The window to 'my room' was still boarded up. It was the only window boarded up. A couple of the boards had weathered. From memory, one or two had fallen off, perhaps from the weight of the burden placed upon them, I thought. I wondered whether these boards had been used to just keep me in darkness, or whether they had also been used to damage other people. It was an inconceivable thought. That room.

My potential, my future was burnt in that room. Part of me died there, much of me died there.

Reflections

Writing this submission has been exhausting, overwhelming, and sad.

It has taken much time and assistance.

The trauma of my experiences with the Mental Health System lives with me every day. It has not left me, and never will.

I am grateful that in writing this, I have had the unqualified support of my GP and Advocate, Dr [REDACTED] my current psychologist, and a close friend whose similar experience has allowed me to share my own.

The level of damage, and the extent of my fear from my experiences of the Mental Health System has prevented me from talking about what happened for decades.

Not even my doctor knew the degree and extent of what happened to me because I was too scared, too terrified, of the System. I still am.

It is a System where much is Hidden.

I have been told that what was done to me was cruel, dangerous, prohibited.

People have died in the dark backwaters of [REDACTED]; I have been told. I believe this.

But I can only speak of my own experience.

To this day, I don't know whether I was the subject of an unlawful and reckless experiment; or just subjected to various levels of malice - personal, bureaucratic, systemic.

To this day, I have never heard of a brutal and violent 'treatment' remotely like the one 'authorised' against me.

To this day, I have no idea who authorised it, on what grounds, for what purpose.

To be abandoned, to be repeatedly threatened and confined in isolation without light or fresh air, without the ability to wash, without the ability to speak or contact anyone, without the ability to move, without the certainty of when the Hell would end, how can such abuse be considered a treatment?

How can the desolation it causes be considered a treatment?

How was torture considered and accepted as a treatment?

How were the people involved, acting within the System, allowed to get away with such a severe failure of duty of care?

Before [REDACTED] I had no suicidal ideation. This took me many years on my own to control, because I could not seek treatment.

Before [REDACTED], I did not pick the skin off my face. This took me many years to control, but then only with the assistance of my doctor.

Before [REDACTED] my anxiety and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder were manageable. They are now manifestly untreatable.

Before [REDACTED]; I did not suffer from PTSD. My triggers and symptoms are now too many to mention.

Issues of trust and betrayal have now permeated and dominated my existence.

I now have a fear of medical professionals, of medical situations.

My doctor needs to reassure me constantly. But she now knows my level of trauma and always gives me her time, patience and understanding. This has been a greater healing than any involuntary 'treatment'.

When I have to go and have tests, or to see other medical professionals, I usually need support because my trauma and anxiety is so severe that I have panic attacks and begin to shake. Fearful of having to explain my situation, my circumstances, I usually say that it's part of my anxiety - that I suffer from 'white-coat syndrome'.

My experiences have affected my ability to form relationships, to make friends, to function in society as a 'normal' human being.

I am reclusive.

I live in poverty, with my disability.

I had incredible opportunities and potential. I grieve for what could have been. I often wonder.

I never made a complaint about what happened in that room in [REDACTED] because I didn't know I could make a complaint. If I had known I could make a complaint, my fear of the system would have prevented me from doing so. My treatment was almost completely centred around instilling fear and exercising control. This is, I believe, how they escaped scrutiny.

My good fortune however, is that I now have a trusting doctor, a humane psychologist, a good friend and a loyal brother. These people are now aware of some of what I have gone through.

These people have all, in their various ways, helped me. I am most grateful.

On reflection, I have often wondered what would have been had I not been subjected to the horrors of [REDACTED]. I was articulate, intelligent and coherent, but the negative elements in the system seemed to surge against me when I was most vulnerable, without an Advocate and without the support of privilege.

Circumstances in my early life led me to seeking help. It was a difficult decision, because I came from a background where there was much stigma around such things, and there still is, it is a sad truth. Public figures are rightly praised for coming forward with personal issues surrounding mental health. But the disadvantaged, the marginalised, the poor, women, children, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, these groups are not always treated or seen in the same light. Or so it seems to me, from my personal experience.

From my personal experience too, what began to unwind, in some small way, the extensive trauma and damage done to me by the System, was a gradual reconnection to something deep within me that I valued. *The creative experience*. This was realised in a context where people listened, where people did not assert power and control, where equality of thought, expression and purpose ran in the same direction and was valued. *Where my well-being and my point of view was considered at every single moment*. Where I was not at the end of some rat's maze.

The creative experience lit up the dark room that the system had placed me in.

For me, my problems began as a child with issues of self-worth, and these progressed into loops of doubt. I compensated by working hard, too hard. At [REDACTED]; neglect, medication and harsh and illegitimate interventions, did not work for me. These loops of self-doubt became spirals of fear, they made my conditions worse, gave me PTSD, and other serious health issues. Abuse and torture are not remedies or solutions for psychological issues stemming from a lack of self-worth.

I believe that the arts, both verbal and non-verbal, can be instrumental in healing. Too often in the mental health setting too much emphasis is placed on medications, on invasive and interventionist therapies, because the market, the system, the public, want quick fixes. These treatments are, of course, important and sometimes vital. But sometimes they can also make things worse, as was the case for me. I believe these treatments do not always lead to long term healing. The repair of the mind and the soul can be slow, and can have its own path.

I believe too that therapies involving animals, plants and the natural environment, can contribute to this gradual healing process. Or at the very least, abate the very worst of the conditions, enough to allow for some respite.

I know there is building research in these areas, particularly in relation to treating PTSD, and I have personally found them useful in stabilising some of my more debilitating symptoms, post 'treatment'.

I have written my story in the hope that it will help with the work of the Royal Commission and assist others with their experiences within the Mental Health System.

Many thanks again to Mr Daniel Andrews, Mr Martin Foley and the Commissioners for allowing me to share my story.

"Meg"

ADDENDUM

Comments taken from my 7 January 2019 Submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health

In my 7 January 2019 submission, I made some comments on a couple of areas that I felt the Royal Commission could perhaps focus on. I am quoting two of them below because I feel that they will now have greater clarity and significance in context to my "lived experience" submission presented above.

"It can sometimes take decades to discover that a particular treatment or action was damaging, or inadequate, or that it was gravely wrong. Or perhaps a patient is aware at the time that his or her treatment had been instigated by a misdiagnosis, or even by malice, but coming forward with a contemporaneous complaint could be terrifying and fraught with fear of retribution.

Power imbalances in a mental health setting are overwhelming. They cause silence from fear and result in an immobilisation where the failures of the system are never reported and thus never resolved.

What was done to me in my early twenties was horrific. I was told at the time that it was for my own good. It was not. I voluntarily went into the system because I needed rest and needed some help. But I was left incapacitated, effectively tortured, to the point where I wanted to take my own life.

This was not how I was when I entered the system.

It took many years just to face these experiences again because they were so painful and terrifying and because I was afraid of being misrepresented, of being lied about, of finding myself once again trapped within a system that could be exploited either by improper processes or malintent.

While my fear and dread of the system prevented me from coming forward with a complaint at the time; other consequences of the damage done to me by my interactions with the system and its failures have taken me nearly 40 years to fully see and understand."

And:

"A patient in a mental health setting is already at a serious disadvantage. Being told that one can make a complaint about one's treatment can raise issues around whether or not such a complaint will only end up increasing the patient's vulnerability and or attracting discrimination or worse.

In an assessment or treatment scenario, there is a power imbalance. This power imbalance is particularly conspicuous in a mental health setting. Despite avenues for complaint, a patient faces prejudice and bias. This can have ongoing issues - for instance, being flagged as "difficult" or worse. Or through a misdiagnosis clouding the complaints process, or even through malintent by those who are in the field of the complaint.

Other complex complaints about the specific behaviour of individuals (for example senior staff, psychiatrists, psychologists) within the Mental Health system, which relate to allegations of misconduct, are particularly problematic.

I feel that the Complaints Process within the Mental Health system requires particular attention due to the vulnerable nature of the person making the complaint, the power imbalance inherent within the system, and the potential for further harm being done to the patient."
