



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**COMMITTEES**

**Community Affairs Committee**

**Report**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 19 June 2008**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Polley, Sen Helen

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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Senator POLLEY** (Tasmania) (10.06 am)—*The incorporated speech read as follows—*

Mr President I rise to speak on the interim report into the state of Mental Health Services in Australia.

Before I start please let me express my thanks to Elton Humphrey Secretary of the Community Affairs Committee and all the members of the secretariat who do such a good job in making sure we are able to put together these reports. They are a valuable resource to all of us and without them I doubt we would be able to do half as much work.

I would also thank the community and other organisations, Government Departments and State Governments as well as the individuals who took the time to present submissions to us. There are also all those we met with in New Zealand earlier this year regarding Mental Health issues. The trip to New Zealand was certainly informative and gave us a good understanding of how those on the other side of the Tasman are handling similar issues.

We heard during the course of these hearings that there has been some progress towards many of the initiatives in the COAG plan that was set forward by the previous Select Committee on Mental Health, but that there is much work still to be done. However, since this is still only an interim report we are not able to present any recommendations at this point - these will follow in due course and will provide a greater insight into areas that can be improved or changed.

For a long time Mental Health was one of those issues that were rarely talked about in the public sphere. From serious illnesses such as schizophrenia to the darkness of clinical depression, these issues were hidden away and not readily discussed. The fact that nearly 1 in 5 Australians will experience some form of mental illness each year, that will cost the country almost \$9.6 billion in lost productivity shows just how important the treatment and management of mental illnesses are.

Thankfully we have moved past that and into an era where we treat these issues for what they are - diseases that can cripple individuals as surely as any other. It's important that we have frank discussions on mental health in order to get better outcomes for all concerned.

As I stated earlier the previous COAG plan made some progress towards implementing the National Mental Health Strategy. In addition to that progress, the recent Federal Government announcement of the establishment of a National Advisory Council on Mental Health to act in an advisory capacity is a step in the right direction. The council will be able to provide independent advice to the

Government and will hopefully include consumers and carers.

Through the course of this inquiry we have heard from the various interest groups that there are still a number of issues that we can do better. The main one that seemed to stand out is coordination of mental health services.

Further coordination is required in both the provision and the running of mental health services - and it is in this area that the Rudd Governments National Advisory Council can help, by articulating a consistent national approach and bringing together all levels of government. This can deliver the better outcomes that I talked about earlier.

I should also point out, and I think it is mentioned in the report itself, that the links between mental health services, and those assisting alcohol and drug dependent individuals was a key area that should be further looked at. It is important that any strategy for helping the mentally ill recognises that these other facets can contribute to mental illness.

In many ways, treating mental illness in a vacuum without looking at the various societal pressures that can contribute is treating symptoms without looking at the causes. At the end of a day, a considered holistic approach will be much more beneficial than a piecemeal one.

With regard to my own state, it was pleasing to read the Tasmanian Government submission and see that the Government has put a great deal of thought into its own efforts with regard to supporting mental health services, and identified many of the same issues in the state that we ourselves have noticed on a Federal level.

Tasmania's own COAG Mental Health Group, set up after the recommendations of the previous Select Committee, has developed its own model for collaboration between the various sectors in this area. It was also pleasing to hear how the Tasmanian Government is planning to improve mental health outcomes within our state.

I'd like to commend the Tasmanian Labor Government for their efforts, and all the work that has already been done to help those who suffer from mental illness, their families, carers and other support groups. It has been great to see and I hope that they continue their efforts.

This inquiry has certainly been something that I am proud to have been involved in. The state of our mental health services is something that should be continually looked at and evaluated, and I am glad that that Government has taken up this challenge through the establishment of the National Advisory Council.

I am sure that when the final report is delivered we will have been able to put forward some recommendations which

will show where real improvement can be delivered for the mentally ill.

I commend this interim report to the Senate.

Question agreed to.