



Mental Health Worker Safety (Proof)

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MENTAL HEALTH WORKER SAFETY

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Mr DONALD PAGE (Ballina) [11.29 p.m.]: I bring to the attention of the House the launch this coming Friday in Ballina of the Working Safe Toolkit. The toolkit is a new resource developed for people working in the mental health field and is aimed at making their visits to people's homes and neighbourhoods safer. The launch of this toolkit follows the death last year of 48-year-old Michael Corkhill, a healthcare caseworker with On Track Community Programs, an organisation that helps people with disabilities and mental health issues. Mr Corkill was violently murdered on 27 June 2009 in Lismore. He was making a visit to the offender's house. Earlier this year the offender was found not guilty of Mr Corkill's murder because of mental illness.

Working in the mental health sector is often complex and stressful for staff, and sometimes it is dangerous. I think it is important to recognise and praise the wonderful work that people involved in the mental health sector do in the community. Their commitment to their jobs is more often than not above and beyond what is required, and we as community representatives, and the broader community, should stop to think about the value of these people to the health system, and particularly to the patients they work with. I extend my sympathies to Mr Corkill's family and friends. The challenge for organisations and individuals is to make sure that the chances of such an incident happening again are minimised. I know this is difficult given the sometimes unpredictable nature of mental illness.

I was pleased to make representations to the North Coast Area Health Service and the Minister for Health on behalf of the Mental Health Interagency Northern Rivers shortly after Mr Corkill's death regarding the need to provide a safer working environment for people who work with those in the community who have a mental illness. I would like to think that my representations had some beneficial impact in highlighting the problem to Government and in the possible development of the Working Safe Toolkit.

The Working Safe Toolkit has been developed under the guidance of the Mental Health Coordinating Council [MHCC], the peak body for mental health in New South Wales. The council convened a reference group which included members from National Disability Services, WorkCover, Dr John Allan, the Chief Psychiatrist from NSW Health, and the Insurance Council. For many people working in the mental health sector the majority of their work is carried out away from their office. The challenge for the Mental Health Coordinating Council was how to create a culture of mindfulness and safety for people who make home visits to clients, making workers risk-aware and better able to assess and manage potential dangers.

The Working Safe Toolkit presents staff with a checklist of questions to go through before embarking on a home visit. It also provides a list of things to do and not to do when arriving at a home visit. In some instances the danger could come from the neighbourhood itself, or an unrestrained dog or dogs, or perhaps there are drugs and alcohol in the neighbourhood, or neighbours are not welcoming visitors. The Working Safe Toolkit is aimed at reducing risk. Mental health problems are a leading cause of disability in Australia. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in its report "Australia's Health 2010" noted that, of the 714,156 people receiving the disability pension as at June 2007, more than a quarter had a psychological or psychiatric condition. The National Survey of Health and Wellbeing in 2007 estimated that one in five Australians between the ages of 16 and 85 experienced one or more of the common mental disorders.

On the NSW Health website there is a charter for mental health care. It basically sets out the rights of people with mental illness, who are some of the most misunderstood and disadvantaged people in our society. It is also important, however, to ensure that we are looking after the people who work and care for people with mental illness. I recently came across some notes on the Victorian Parliament's inquiry into strategies to reduce assaults in public places in Victoria. The final report of the inquiry found that more than one-quarter of people assaulted in the workplace were hospital staff. However, many incidents were not reported. These statistics would include mental health workers as well. I suspect that the figures for New South Wales would be comparable.

Mental illness will continue to be a major issue in our society and a significant cost to our health system. I congratulate the Mental Health Coordinating Council and all the agencies, organisations and individuals involved in the development of the Working Safe Toolkit, which is designed to reduce risk in the workplace. I will be there on Friday for the toolkit's official launch. On behalf of the community I also thank mental health workers for their commitment and dedication to their profession and the many people who depend on them.