



National Network of Private Psychiatric Sector Consumers and Carers

SUBMISSION ON THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO EMPLOYMENT AND DISABILITY *ISSUES PAPER 2* *MARCH, 2005*

INTRODUCTION

The *National Network of Private Psychiatric Sector Consumers and Carers* (National Network) represents Australians who contribute to private health insurance funds and who receive treatment and care for mental illnesses and disorders delivered within the Australian private sector.

The National Network welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on the *National Inquiry into Employment and Disability*. It also represents an opportunity to raise issues of concern for people directly involved in the receipt of psychiatric treatment and care and who wish to re-enter the workforce, but because of the nature of their illnesses, find a number of barriers toward meaningful employment are encountered.

The National Network would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the issues raised in this Submission and would like to work together with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in a positive way to ensure that those who will be most affected by the Inquiry have direct input into it.

As a consumer and carer organisation, the first impression of the Issues Papers are that it is probably on the *Issues Paper 2: Issues Facing People with Disabilities* that we would like to focus our attention. The National Network believes that we are in a position to speak on behalf of private mental health consumers and their family carers.

Issues Paper 2: Issues Facing People with Disabilities

1. What are some of the barriers faced, or the most pressing concerns of people with a psychiatric disability who might want to seek employment?

1. Community attitudes

The National Network's constituency are consumers who suffer from a mental illness or disorder and their family carers. Therefore, by the very nature of the health condition of our members and the people we represent, stigma is often present in some form or another. A mental health consumer's condition is highly sensitive and any disclosure can, and indeed often does, result in discriminatory practices.

These can range from not gaining employment in the first place, to struggling to cope with the mental illness and work commitments.

Disclosure of a mental illness is often a requirement in an application for some areas of employment—and in some circumstances reasonably so. However the applicant often experiences anxiety as to how this information will be treated and wonders whether this will automatically exclude them from interview processes. Experience with some employers has resulted in the strong belief that the employers are not prepared to “take a risk” as they perceive it to be.

Another issue that links to this is that some educational institutions seem either unable or unwilling to advise their students on how to handle the request for this information. Some employment situations may be deemed to be inappropriate for applicants suffering from some forms of mental illness, but this should be clearly stated at the outset by the prospective employer.

Further, in the working environment itself, workers often reveal their hostility to people with a disability, speaking in a derisory or denigratory way, apparently reflecting more widely held community attitudes. This creates an environment that adds to the difficulties that a mentally ill person has in managing an illness.

2. Misunderstanding of the impact of a psychiatric disability

Many people who suffer from a mental illness, carry a heavy burden of general ill health, suffer great emotional pain and struggle to keep their disability stable.

The community, Government or disability support services including Centrelink do not generally acknowledge these barriers.

Many of the front line staff of Government and support services dealing with disabilities are inexperienced and generally uninformed about the nature of **mental illness** and the impact this has on the lives of the people they see. Many people with a psychiatric disability indeed wish to be employed in some form or another.

3. Episodic nature of psychiatric disability

One of the most misunderstood aspects of psychiatric disability is the often episodic nature of the illnesses. Some people can function in the community and life situations sometimes without incident, until they relapse into mental illness. This relapse is often rapid, seemingly with little cognition regarding the onset and is totally disabling in its force. Swift intervention is required, often needing hospitalisation to stabilise the condition. These period of hospitalisation and rehabilitation can last many months, sometimes longer, with accompanying and associated disability.

4. Chronic and multiple diagnoses

One of the persistent difficulties of people diagnosed with a mental illness, is the chronic nature of these illnesses, with many suffering associated, yet separate multiple diagnoses. These can be exacerbated by the use of drug and alcohol in an attempt to reduce, either knowingly or not, the emotional suffering.

5. Ability to care for self

There are some mental illnesses which can rob people of the very ability to care for themselves. Again, this can be episodic in nature, yet crippling in effect.

6. Disability Support Pension

There are many people with a psychiatric disability who feel that without the safety of the disability support pension, they would be homeless. We know this is true as many residents of supported accommodation and those who are homeless, suffer from either a diagnosed, or undiagnosed mental illness.

For these people, the likelihood of meaningful, consistent employment is not an option.

Additionally, the level of the disability support pension is of course insufficient to maintain a psychiatrically disabled person in the rental housing market. The loss of the pension is also significant. When a disabled person enters the employment market, the remuneration is often low. Therefore the loss of the health card benefits are of special significance to consumers whose compulsory continuing medication is expensive, and in some cases could be prohibitively so.

(a) Are there any factors in addition to the ones listed above that might make people with disabilities reluctant to seek or stay in employment.

The National Network considers that the above, represent most of the pressing issues faced when people are considering employment or staying in employment.

The very nature of employment means that people need to face many barriers including great anxiety regarding their ability to sustain and fulfil their work commitments. Many people display few signs of their psychiatric disability compared to others with physical incapacities. Therefore the requirements regarding support need to be in the areas not required of physical disability.

2. What assistance is currently available to support people with disabilities to enter and remain in employment?

Centrelink, and other employment agencies do not seem to be able to respond flexibly to many situations. In particular, many psychiatrically disabled people are already skilled or talented in some way—and they frequently do not respond enthusiastically to possible employment opportunities at low level or menial tasks. This is experienced as a further denial of themselves as whole and worthwhile people, with something to offer the workforce. These agencies, and indeed some employers, equate mental illness with intellectual disability, or poor educational achievement. Many mentally ill patients do not need basic skills training, though this seems often to be a ‘taken for granted’ requirement.

Finally, the various levels of bureaucracy do not co-operate very well with each other and often seem ignorant about what documentation is often required to enter some portions of the workforce, let alone the time it takes to get the required information together. The care of the patient is subsumed under the heavy weight of the organisations’ documentation requirements. Thus a simple need to regain a drivers licence, which has been held in abeyance due to the mental illness, can be extended, sometimes resulting in a prospective employer becoming unprepared to hold the

position open any longer. The applicant's attitude to this hindrance is defined as not being a reasonable response to this particular situation, but a reflection of the mental illness.

- The Disability Support Pension -
Offers some security in facing life, but because of the issues around the episodic nature of mental illness, many recipients are afraid to seek out employment as a means of financial security.
- Centrelink Disability Officers –
As mentioned previously, many front line officers are inexperienced and generally uninformed about the nature of mental illness. This lack of information and understanding needs to be corrected immediately.
- Commonwealth Rehabilitation Scheme –
Many people with a psychiatric disability engage in training under this scheme. The difficulties arise when employment is sought afterwards. Many people believe that employers perception of their abilities are somewhat skewed because of the unstable nature of mental illness.
- Some people with a mental illness face other types of discriminatory practices even within the disability sector.

3. Solutions

Clearly there are no simple solutions around employment for people with a psychiatric disability.

- However, the retention for a two year period of the abeyance of the Disability Support Pension is fundamental to the attempt to engage in meaningful employment.
- There needs to be some sort of "safety net" that enables people to attempt to disengage from the DSP and take the risk of entering open employment, bearing in mind the episodic, chronic and sometimes swift onset of mental illness.
- Better informed and more experienced front line staff of all Government and Disability Employment Services is required when dealing with people with psychiatric disability.
- Specific, stand alone psychiatric support services aimed at these specific disabilities needs to be established.