

PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS — PATIENT PROTECTION

Motion

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [3.58 pm]: I move —

That this house notes the findings of the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council, that 45 per cent of women who are inpatients in psychiatric hospitals in that state are sexually assaulted while an inpatient, and calls on the government to take urgent action to —

- (a) establish the extent of similar problems in Western Australian psychiatric hospitals; and
- (b) protect women in Western Australian psychiatric hospitals from sexual assault.

I will make this speech in two tranches, one of which will be very short. In the six minutes left for me to speak today, I will introduce the subject to people because it has been some time since I raised this matter in the house by way of several questions to Hon Helen Morton, the Minister for Mental Health. I will spend the next few minutes reminding honourable members what the issue is here.

The Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council report referred to in the text of this motion was prepared in 2013 and is entitled “Zero Tolerance for Sexual Assault: A safe admission for women”. I will have a lot to say about the context of that report as we move through this motion, but I will now briefly outline what was established in that report. Bear in mind that the substance of this motion is partly about the fact that we do not have anything directly comparable to the Victorian report to tell us exactly what the situation is in Western Australia. Without scoring any particular political points, it is fairly obvious that if this is the situation in one Australian state, it is likely to be replicated to some extent or another in all Australian states.

The report revealed that women in psychiatric care, women who are inpatients in psychiatric institutions, are not safe. Many women in those institutions are there because they have become ill due to some history of abuse, particularly sexual abuse or sexual assault. The study shows that once they are admitted to hospital as an inpatient, they are not safe when they get into that environment. The Victorian study shows that nearly half the women in mental hospitals and institutions were sexually assaulted while they were inpatients. Of course, once we start unpacking that statistic, we find a number of other equally troubling findings. The first is that 80 per cent of those women—not the 80 per cent who had been sexually assaulted, but 80 per cent of all the women who were inpatients in mental hospitals—were fearful of being abused. There is also a lot of data to show that when women reported actual abuse and harassment, more than 80 per cent of the time they were not believed and their evidence not taken seriously. The report also shows that most of the perpetrators were other patients. Of course, this leads to the obvious corollary of that statement, which is that some of the perpetrators were not patients and were indeed staff or other people associated with the institutions. As I said, most of those women reported that they were not helped when they went to authorities in the institution and told them about the assaults.

I have raised several questions—both questions without notice and questions on notice—about this issue. Hon Helen Morton said that this is a matter of some concern. I have very carefully gone through the new Mental Health Bill 2013 to see whether, in the context of that bill, some of these issues have been addressed. Of course, we will have ample time between now and whenever we finish to very closely look at that bill. There are some things that I think are not addressed in the bill and those are basically the things that I want to outline as we move through this debate.

If I can just share with honourable members—I am sorry to be slightly hesitant here but I am trying to pace myself through the remaining one minute and 11 seconds—a flavour of the Victorian report so that members know exactly what we are talking about. I can do no better than to quote from the foreword to the report by Isabell Collins, who is the director of the Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council. She starts as follows —

As human beings, we are all “creatures of habit.” If we do something often enough we do it without thinking. If we see something often enough we cease to see it. If we hear something often enough we stop listening and if we think something often enough we think it without question. This habitual way of seeing, listening, thinking and doing is in us all. It exists at a community, government, bureaucracy, management and employee level and affects not only the decisions we take, but also how we make them. Additionally, we usually only ever neglect or abuse the rights of those we see as having less power than we have and we tend not to get involved in trying to stop or prevent abusive or neglectful behaviour unless it is happening to a loved one.

I will have a lot more to say about this when we return to the debate in a couple of weeks.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

