

University apologises for experiments on children

By Barbara Miller for PM

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Boys eat dinner at Clontarf Boys Home in WA.



Around 500,000 children grew up in government-run institutions and foster

The University of Melbourne has issued an apology to the Forgotten Australians over medical experiments performed on children in state care.

In an email to staff and students, the university's vice-chancellor expressed particular regret for the part played by researchers linked to the institution.

Following the revelations in the Nuremberg trials of the extent to which Nazi doctors had experimented on children, a code of conduct was developed for obtaining consent in medical research.

In the following decades that code was refined and nowadays many countries, including Australia, have their own strict guidelines for the use of children in medical experiments.

But before that it was fairly common practice for children in care in particular to be used in experiments, usually without consent.

In 2004, Queensland Labor Senator Jan McLucas chaired a Senate inquiry into the experiences of the Forgotten Australians.

"I think it was quite surprising to all of the committee members the extent of use of children for a range of trials, of vaccines, of other medical procedures, including horrifically enforced gynaecological examinations of young girls as almost routine," she said.

"It happened in a lot of places in Australia; drugs were provided to children under approved trials, events that would never happen nowadays of course, but it was rather extensive and fairly shocking."

'Deep regret'

In some of the material sourced by the inquiry, a researcher from the University of Melbourne is named as being involved in experiments using children in care.

In an email sent to staff and students, the university's vice-chancellor, Glyn Davis, said it was appropriate that the university took the occasion "to express its deep regret for the part played by researchers linked to its community in vaccination research trials conducted after World War II using children in orphanages as subjects".

The email says the counselling services of the university are available to Forgotten Australians who are part of its community.

But the president of Care Leavers Australia Network, Leonie Sheedy, says that is not good enough.

"I read the press release that said that counselling would be available, but there was no number given for people to contact, so how serious are they at offering support and counselling to these people who've been used as experiments?" she asked.

Call for information

Steve Quinn was in a Church of England boys school at Carlingford in New South Wales in the early 1960s.

He believes he may have been a subject in a scientific experiment of some kind and he is calling on all universities and institutions to take a good look at their records.

"When I contacted one university they told me the professor who had run the program had died and that person's records had been thrown out," he said.

"I don't think that's good enough. I was concerned that that institution, and probably others as well, want to hide this information for legal reasons, because obviously if they've done this without getting permission from people they could be sued.

"I think they've got to now be prepared to put those legal concerns aside and find whatever they can find and make a real effort to dig the information out and let people know."

'Tweaking some consciences'

Senator McLucas agrees that institutions should look into their records and try to right past wrongs.

"I welcome this move from the University of Melbourne to recognise that their researchers in the past have violated - in my view - these children," she said.

"But there is more that can be done. Our community recommended that any institution that holds records about any child that was kept in care should make those records freely available to the people who were institutionalised.

"And not only just make them available, they should go out of their way to try to locate people.

"I think that Monday's momentous event probably has tweaked some consciences around the country and to that effect, I encourage other institutions who may hold information to take this step; to apologise and then act on that apology."

PM contacted the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute in Melbourne, which was identified in the Senate inquiry as having used children in care for experiments, to ask if they would also consider offering an apology to the Forgotten Australians.

The institute did not respond to the request.