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[redacted]

January 15th 2011.

Submission to the
Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices

Early in 1998 I watched an ABC TV program about "relinquishing mothers" women who had given up their new born babies for adoption during the 60's and 70's in Australia. The program told the stories of at least 3 mothers who gave graphic accounts of how this process had affected them then and still does – nearly 30 years later. One woman was still looking for her 27-year-old son – as well as attending a psychiatrist on a weekly basis. The program provided old film footage taken in labour wards and nurseries of a major hospital involved in the scheme. Nurses were shown espousing the virtues of adoption – the hospital Matron was shown giving details of the criteria of the "perfect adoptive parents". I was absolutely stunned and appalled as I realised that I was one of those nurses (not in the actual film) but I had been a nurse working at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne at exactly the time depicted in the program. I related and relived every incident that was depicted on the old film footage. Yes, we had taken babies from their mothers at birth, without them holding or even seeing their child. The mothers were then admitted into wards without their babies and ostracised in many different ways, finally being discharged about 1 week later, never having seen or held their baby or the "new" parents who had adopted their baby.

The babies stayed in the nurseries in the hospital waiting to be adopted, sometimes for months, their only contact being with the nurses such as myself who cared for them on a daily basis. Needless to say we become very fond of these babies, however it wasn't the same as being cared for by their mother.

Whilst viewing this TV program I was deeply distressed by the women's stories. I felt an overwhelming sense of shame and remorse that I had been involved in something that had caused such pain and suffering. I felt very sorry for what I had done even though at the time we believed what we were doing was "right" for the child and the mother. However I now believe that the process was very cruel, unjust and very dehumanising to both mother and child.

I feel very strongly that these women need to be acknowledged for the pain and suffering which was caused to many of them. Abortions at the time were totally illegal, expensive and very difficult to obtain, so for many women who found themselves pregnant in the 60's there was very little choice but to go through with the pregnancy and to give up their babies to institutions who organised adoptions.

I support the development of a national framework to assist all states and territories of Australia to address the consequences for the mothers, their families and the children who were subject to forced adoption policies. This framework could include reuniting families

that have long been separated, the provision of counselling services and a review of current adoption policies so that this out-dated process does not happen again.

I believe that a national apology to these women, their families and their children needs to be given in recognition of the pain and suffering that they may have experienced through this inappropriate, archaic and unwarranted process. Whilst at the same time an opportunity could be given for staff such as myself, who was involved in the adoption processes to offer their own personal apology if they so desire.

I would strongly recommend that the Senate Community Affairs Committee view the ABC documentary as I am sure it will provide great insight into the practices that occurred during the forced adoption process.

Yours sincerely
Annie Florence
(retired registered nurse and midwife)