Submission to the Senate inquiry into "Commonwealth contribution to former forced adoption policies and practices.

My name is Karin Margaret McRae, nee Clark. I am a Citizen of the Commonwealth of Australia and reside in the State of Victoria.

On the _ day of October 1969 I gave birth to a son at The Royal Women's Hospital in Carlton.

Some 3 to 4 months earlier I had attended the hospital in order seek pre natal services and advice. As a part of that first visit, in addition to seeing a Doctor and completing paperwork related to booking in to the hospital, I had to see a woman who I believe was a social worker or almoner. The interview was conducted behind curtains while others sat outside waiting their turn (not very private). During this interview the subject of adoption was strongly advocated as the best solution to my predicament. This was seen as the best choice for the baby and the best choice for me to enable me to have a new start and put it all behind me. My mother was at the hospital with me and also urged this course of action believing it was my best choice. In truth, I believed I had no other choice. I was alone and abandoned by the baby's father and had no financial support.

Having elicited my tacit consent arrangements were then made for me to take up residence away from home so no one would know about my shameful predicament.

I was offered the option of going to a Doctors family in Brighton who, in return for giving me a roof over my head, would expect some assistance with housework child minding etc and for this I was paid a small amount of pocket money. I cannot recall the amount but $5 comes to mind and while it may have been more it was still a very small amount.

In return I was expected to live in 7 days a week, do all cleaning, washing, ironing, cooking of evening meals and care of 4 school aged children. I did get some time to myself on a Sunday and was not required to get breakfasts. This scheme was promoted, I believe, by an auxiliary group at the hospital, as a good work to help fallen girls rehabilitate themselves and hide from their shame. I know from talking to other women who gave birth in similar circumstances that I was 'lucky' as those that were housed in institutions had a much tougher time of it.

I can't recall if it was during this interview or at subsequent interviews that I was strongly advised not to see my child when it was born as this would make it easier for me to let it go for adoption. I know I was told more than once that this was best for me.

I was admitted to the hospital on the _ October late in the evening having been in early stages of labour for about 36 hours. I truly did not know what to expect, I had not been given any preparation for the birth process in any way. I was shaved and given an enema and then gowned and put into a room with several other women. I recall a nurse wanting to check on the progress of my baby or some other procedure; I know my waters had to be broken somewhere at this time. I was mid contraction and think she was trying to feel up, it felt like my back passage, to see where the baby's head was. I was on my side and think my leg was in a stirrup. I asked her to wait for the contraction to finish and tried to turn over. I was pushed back over and got a hard slap on my behind for my trouble.

There was I believe some problem with my bladder being full and me not being able to void. These conversations went on over the top of you as if you were not present but I remember hearing someone say"she is not to see the baby". I was anesthetised for the birth and came to when the doctor was stitching me up. I was badly torn and I recall someone telling me I had 30 stiches.

I was transferred to a bed in a 4 bed ward; all the other occupants were unwed mothers. Such was the culture in the hospital that one of the older cleaning staff called "_____" regularly gave us lectures on how bad we were and that God would know what we had done.

I was there for I think around 10 days. Medications were given daily and included some clear liquid that 'helped you sleep" I only know that within about 10 minutes of having this I was seeing double. I now believe this was meant to keep us docile etc.

Somewhere around the last couple of days of my admission I had an interview to complete paperwork, birth registration and sign the dreaded adoption papers. I cried all the way through this process and refused to give my baby a name so the woman conducting the interview called him John. I was told that the adoption would become final I think it was in 30 days but it may have been 28 days I had it in my mind that it was about 4 weeks.

I left the hospital and went home and literally cried for 3 weeks. During this time my mum made it know that I could bring the baby home if that is what I chose.

I contacted the hospital and told them I wanted to revoke my consent to the adoption. I was again strongly counselled as to this being a bad choice. I was asked to consider the adopting parents who had already been notified that my child was to be theirs. I stuck to my guns and made arrangements to come to the hospital and revoke my consent and reclaim my child.

I am sure you have heard dozens of accounts from other women similar to the above.

I am not sure what part the Commonwealth played in this process or how much was known about it officially or un-officially but wish you to know the following.

It was the practice, and still is as far as I know for families to foster care for the babies during the time before the adoption consent became final. My child went to a woman called Mrs _____ who lived at _____, Ringwood. Some weeks after I had brought my child home there was an article in the Woman's Day detailing the wonderful work done by these women and their families. The thrust of the article was that Joy Snedden, wife of Billy Snedden who was Minister for Immigration at the time, was one of these kind people. As Mrs Snedden had no child in care at the time of the interview, my child and his carer Mrs _____ were also featured. This was confirmed by Mrs _____ at the time when I phoned her.

I believe therefore, at least one minister of the Commonwealth had knowledge of some of these adoption practices.

Further I would like to say I don't believe either I or other women were emotionally or mentally able to appreciate the implications of giving consent to the adoption as required by the act. At no time was I given any advice about other alternatives that would enable me to keep the child. This information came to me later from a contact with a phone helper from the Council for the Single Mother and her Child who provided advice re financial considerations and help available after I brought my child home.

I was so distressed by the way I felt about the hospital that I never attended for my six week check out and paid to see a local GP instead. I am also pleased that the hospital has moved from it former site to Flemington Road as I could never even drive past the old one without deep sadness and foreboding of what had taken place there and how I almost lost my child forever.

I have lived a large part of my life under a veil of secrecy because I did not want anyone to know any of these circumstances. When my husband and I married we formally adopted my son. And for most of his early life, and until he was an adult, we never even told him about the past. We lied to people about how long we had been married such was my sense of shame lest anyone should find out. I have few close friends as I have always held people off at a distance from a fear that someone would know or find out the truth about me.

I thank you for the opportunity to tell my story and hope that it may improve the inquiry's understanding of these practices and the impact they had on individuals.

I am happy to have my submission published if can assist anyone.

Yours Sincerely

Karin McRae

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