Submission to the Committee Secretary Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

While many adoptees - and indeed many in the adoption process – tend to suffer more psychological issues than the general population, is it an overstatement to assume that all adoptees have suffered irreparable damage as the result of being removed, forcibly or not, from their birth mother. Indeed, I refute it. Some adoptions are good and the simplistic binary of adopted family bad/natural family good is unsophisticated and plain mythical and feeds into the New Idea, happy-ever-after reunion stories that are trotted out every so often.

I think adoptions were very badly done, that the effects of those bad adoptions are still being felt by many and that less secrecy, more compassion and more support would have lead to very different outcomes. However, many individuals suffer in abusive or unhappy family situations and it is simply not helpful to romanticise the life that never was. In fact, it can lead to disastrous attempts at 'reunion'. Insistence on a 'true', 'real' or somehow more legitimate identity also rankles and many of the submissions mention DNA, blood lines and genes which deny that there are many ways that people construct their identities: social, familial, occupational, cultural: not narrowly biological. The idea that adoptees somehow don't know who they are is patronising – 'though admittedly many adoptees do express that sense of dislocation.

I was born at the Queen Victoria Hospital in Melbourne in 1962 and then adopted out from the Mission for Streets and Lanes. The nuns told a range of lies to my parents: that my birth mother - so very young - gratefully gave me up to what she believed was a better home, that my birth father was a Maori who worked on the ships. He actually lives in Cobram. Adoption was never a comfortable topic in our house. But, frankly, it seemed that childbirth at all was an uncomfortable topic at those times for many parents.

I am less concerned about the circumstances of my birth, the revolting moral context of the time and the bullying behaviours of doctors, nurses, clergy and nuns which seemed to be institutionalised and which only impacted on me after the fact. I am more interested in the issue of access to sensitive information: who gets to know what and how information was systemically being sold from government agencies to private detectives who approached birth parents with the tantalising prospect of finding out about the welfare of their baby, child, teenager.

I do not believe that this issue has been raised seriously. It was mentioned in one submission to the WA enquiry. This woman claimed that she tracked down her adopted child as she had not contacted her and the departments hadn't helped – so she "hired someone to find her". This is inexcusable behaviour as it means that someone had access to sensitive information about this child that the child did not even have about herself. And the information was sold. Yet this breech, this outrage, seemed to slip past the committee as a non issue.

In the late 1970s, I was contacted on the phone by a woman who asked my name and who then went on to tell me that she had just met my sister. I do not – did not –- have a sister. I remember my mother took the phone and a confusing conversation took place but then nothing more was said. Then, just after I had my first child in 1991, the phone rang. It was my birth father.

You have to be mindful here, that I have never registered with Jigsaw, I have never given anyone permission to track me down. This is easily confirmed – there will no record of

me getting my original birth certificate or any identifying information about my birth parents. I simply never had any need to know. I had, have, a family. Mother. Father. A brother. Loving Aunts, Uncles, cousins. And a whole lot of other Aunts (Mum's best friends). A partner, kids. And I have done a lot of work on conceptualising identity. But I know all the details of my birth family because I was tracked down and contacted – and yet there will be no record of that information being sought by or issued to me.
And then, out of the blue, a man rings and claims to be my father. Not birth father. Father. He told me that he and my birth mother had married a couple of years after I was born. That I had a sister. He told me that they had rung my parents before my 21st and that they had promised that they would tell me of the call. Needless to say, they didn't and I understand why. Then my birth mother rang. We agreed to meet. A brief meeting. She is a nice woman. I wish her well. My sister put herself in the middle of everything – she had never been told about me. She had 5 kids and was anxious and threatened. We all met several times – but, really, despite sharing double jointed fingers and green eyes, there was no reason to continue. There were such cultural differences, geographic distance and it was all a bit forced and unnatural. That was over 10 years ago. I continue to wish them all well as I'm sure they do me.
There are several points here:
People with access to information about me, my parents and my birth parents misused it. For profit. I was told by my birth mother that they paid hundreds of dollars (a lot in the 1970s) for indentifying information to a detective who had approached them.
Adoptees should be issued with original birth certificates as a matter of course. I should not have to pay for it (I've already paid for the one I have) and I should not have to attend a counselling session with a graduate of some shonky Psychology degree – or I certainly shouldn't have to pay for that harrowing experience. In addition to which, their processes which were designed to protect me have been breached in any case – so they should just hand over all my information – they've clearly given it to someone else!
Birth parents with no understanding of what damage they could do (to themselves, their subsequent children or birth children or the parents) should not be able to contact birth children (or adults as the case may be) out of the blue, without a mediator, without express permission of the adoptee, without some ability to understand the situation from vantage points other than their own. Some adoptees might not even know they were adopted. I understand birth parents may need to meet some profound emotional needs in some cases – but, as the many submissions testify, that needs professional support.
In the cases of bad adoptions – and I have heard of many – free and appropriate (specialised) psychological support should be made available.
A number of adoptees do not have a father on their birth certificate for a range of reasons. Apparently, according to my birth mother, my birth father is not on my birth certificate because he would have been charged with carnal knowledge if he had been identified. This adds such a sordid, criminal aspect to a tragic situation. Perhaps it can now be rectified.