Monday 31 October 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices

I am writing to provide a Supplementary Submission to The Benevolent Society's submission of March 2011 to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices (Submission No. 191).

In our earlier submission and our evidence to the Committee's hearing on 29 April 2011 we indicated that Society was working towards making an apology to those who suffered from forced adoption practices with which The Society was associated.

I am now writing to advise the Committee that The Benevolent Society has today issued a statement of apology for past adoption practices that we were associated and involved with, as follows:

> As Australia's first charity, The Benevolent Society has a long history of supporting the most vulnerable members of our community. It is because of this commitment that we wish to make a public statement of apology about past adoption practices we were associated and involved with.
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> The Benevolent Society has been involved in the care of women and children for close to 200 years, establishing Australia's first maternity hospital, the Royal Hospital for Women in Paddington, which we operated from 1905 to 1992, and opening the Scarba Welfare House for Children at Bondi in 1917. The Benevolent Society also ran an adoption service from Scarba House between 1969 and 1975.
>
> While The Royal Hospital for Women had no official role in organising adoptions, we recognise and acknowledge that unmarried women in our care from the 1940s to the 1980s were not always given the care and respect that they needed during this difficult period of their lives and were sometimes coerced to give up children for adoption. We also recognise and acknowledge our involvement in arranging adoptions in the past through the adoption agency we ran at Scarba House.
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> The Benevolent Society deeply regrets past practices based on polices which, while influenced by societal attitudes of the time, we now know to be deeply flawed and damaging to many unmarried women who gave birth at the hospital.

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The Benevolent Society apologises unreservedly for any pain, unresolved grief or suffering experienced by mothers, fathers, adoptees, adoptive parents and their families as a result of the past adoption practices of The Benevolent Society, the Royal Hospital for Women or Scarba Welfare House for Children.

In the context of a society that stigmatised motherhood out of wedlock and did not provide adequate financial, legal and psychological support for unmarried mothers, adoption was widely assumed to be the only possible option for unmarried pregnant women.

We now recognise that great damage has unintentionally been done to people's lives as a result.

We now understand and acknowledge the deep grief that many mothers experienced after the loss of a child to adoption, and the lack of support available to manage their grief.

Through our extensive work with people affected by adoption over the past 20 years as part of our post adoption support services, we understand the intense shame and secrecy that surrounded past adoptions. What was done cannot be undone but, for many, lifting the burden of secrecy is an enormous relief and an important step towards acknowledging the grief they have carried for so many years.

We have been and still are in the position of being able to offer people affected by past practices specialised support to help them with their lives today. We will help anyone affected by past adoption practices to access assistance and support from the Post Adoption Resource Centre in NSW or Post Adoption Support Queensland. Both services provide telephone support, specialist face-to-face counselling, intermediary services to assist individuals approaching birth relatives, and assistance in accessing adoption records.

We respect the fact that some people may choose not to access services from The Benevolent Society and would be happy to refer them to another appropriate service or counsellor.

We also suggest anyone affected by past adoption practices consider participating in the National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Experiences being conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

These practices were repeated across the country, and we believe the Australian Government has a unique role to play leading the nation in acknowledging these painful mistakes from the past and ensuring they are not repeated. We will continue to advocate for a formal statement of apology from the Commonwealth Government, for better access to specialist counselling and support services throughout Australia and for amendments to legislation to remove the barriers to people accessing adoption information.

We respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered, as part of our commitment to assisting those affected by past adoption practices in their lives today and ensuring the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

The Benevolent Society has qualified staff who are able to assist people affected by past adoption practices. You are welcome to contact us on our dedicated hotline 1800 303 593 or visit our website www.bensoc.org.au for more information.

Yours sincerely

Anne Hollonds
Chief Executive Officer