



Inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices

Terms of Reference

1. Understand the lived experiences of those affected by historical forced adoption practices.
2. Examine the role of the State Government, health services and private institutions in these practices.
3. Identify what measures are currently available to assist persons experiencing distress, their effectiveness, and how those persons may be supported further.
4. Consider any other matter that arises during the course of the inquiry deemed to be relevant by the Committee.

WA Health submission

WA Health appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission and welcomes the parliamentary inquiry into past forced adoptive policy and practice. WA Health acknowledges the work of those providing submission and evidence to the inquiry, particularly given the distressing and sensitive subject matter.

The submission has been developed by the North Metropolitan Health Service in partnership with health services across the state.

The North Metropolitan Health Service and, specifically, the Women and Newborn Health Service acknowledges the historical forced adoption practices that took place at King Edward Memorial Hospital during the years of 1939 to 1980, and at Kensington Hospital after it became an annexe of King Edward Memorial Hospital in 1957. We recognise and acknowledge the agony and trauma that was and continues to be experienced by adopted people, their mothers, fathers, and families as a result of these practices in Western Australia.

A formal apology was issued by North Metropolitan Health Service on 20 March 2023 which is available on the King Edward Memorial Hospital website and is accompanied by further information and resources for those affected. The formal apology reads as follows:

“The North Metropolitan Health Service and specifically, the Women and Newborn Health Service (WNHS) acknowledges the agony and trauma that was and continues to be experienced by adopted people, their mothers, fathers, and families as a result of the past adoption practices in Western Australia.

We acknowledge and feel saddened that our health service, committed to the care of women, engaged in the practice of severing the bond of a willing and loving mother and her child. This practice was cruel and unacceptable, and we regret that King Edward

Memorial Hospital (KEMH), the Kensington Annexe and Osborne Park Hospital played a role in it.

We acknowledge and understand from listening to the stories of people with lived experience, that there has been a myriad of painful enduring consequences for them and that these are irreparable.

We are deeply sorry for the trauma and heartbreak that resulted for all those who have been affected by this practice.

We recognise the enduring bond between a mother and their child and commit ourselves as a healthcare provider to treat all women and children in our care with dignity and compassion based on values of truth, openness and respect for diversity. We will endeavour to ensure that these inhumane actions will never be allowed to occur in our services again.

Support and access to personal records will be extended to all those affected, and a memorial will be built in the grounds of KEMH, as a permanent symbol of our apology and to acknowledge the harm caused by these practices.

WNHS recognises and supports both the [State apology \(PDF\)](#) of the Western Australian Government delivered by former Premier the Hon Colin Barnett in 2010 and the [National apology \(external site\)](#) of the Australian Federal Government delivered by former Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2013.

20 March 2023”

The Executive Director of the Women and Newborn Health Service, Di Barr, met with a group of women with lived experience of forced adoption in 2022, and has since established a working group with a terms of reference. We deeply value the efforts and contributions from this group of women and acknowledge the difficulties of sharing these experiences. We thank these women and we are exceptionally grateful for their efforts and commitment to inform appropriate and considered ways for our health service to continue to acknowledge the trauma and heartbreak experienced, and together find a way towards healing.

We acknowledge that this group of women have expressed that not enough has been done by the Women and Newborn Health Service to address the impact and grief caused by past forced adoptive policies and practices. We acknowledge that a formal apology alone is not enough and we are committed to continuing to address the traumatic and long-lasting impacts caused by past practices of forced adoption.

North Metropolitan Health Service intends to further engage with people affected by past forced adoptive policies and practices to support acknowledgement and healing moving forwards. The formal apology only represents a beginning of acknowledgement. We recognise there has been a myriad of painful enduring consequences that are irreparable, and we are saddened and shamed by past practices that should never have occurred. The Women and Newborn Health Service places great importance on partnering with community and other health services in acknowledging the impact of past adoption policies and practices, notably the years between 1939 and 1980.

Today health service practice is vastly different. The Women and Newborn Health Service prioritises appropriate, safe and quality care for all patients and their families. The care provided is compassionate, individualised, and non-judgemental.

Health service provision in 2023 outlines requirements of providing equity of access for all women in particular, vulnerable cohorts.

King Edward Memorial Hospital is Western Australia's only tertiary maternity and gynaecological hospital. It's the state's only major referral centre for high-risk pregnancies and has a state-of-the-art special care nursery for premature and sick infants. Across King Edward Memorial Hospital and other Women and Newborn Health Services, we are supported by health professionals who are skilled in care provision of cultural and linguistic delivery, adolescent care and perinatal mental health.

Our services commit to providing culturally safe and appropriate care to Aboriginal women and their families. Today we are guided by the Department of Health *Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Framework 2015-2030* and the North Metropolitan Health Service *Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023-2025*.

All woman who access our care are listened to, respected, and supported in receiving health care. We acknowledge our practices today are vastly different from practices of the past, and we are deeply saddened that our health service, committed to the care of women, engaged in the practice of severing the bond of a willing and loving mother and her child.

Our current practice for potential relinquishment of unborn or newborn babies for adoption is governed by the *Bilateral Schedule – Interagency Collaborative Processes on Potential Relinquishment of Unborn or Newborn Baby for Adoption between the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and WA Health (2015)*.

WA Health aligns with the purpose and practice of the schedule and recognises the Department of Communities as the statutory agency in Western Australia with responsibility for promoting the wellbeing of babies, other individuals, families and communities and providing for the protection and care of babies in certain circumstances under the *Children and Community Services Act 2004 (CCS Act)*.

The Department of Communities has responsibility under the adoption act for local and intercountry adoptions and the provision of post adoption services.

The Department of Communities and the Department of Health have joint responsibility for achieving safe outcomes for newborns and families.

This submission acknowledges the Department of Communities will also be providing a submission and will therefore focus on the role of health services in past and current practice.

Birth parents presenting to a Department of Health service may consider adoption as an option for various reasons. Parents considering relinquishing receive sensitive and non-judgemental support from health professionals. Health professionals will discuss options in relation to unplanned pregnancies, to make sure the patient is making their own informed decision. If the birth parents decide to relinquish the baby, they will be informed and supported to make arrangements to relinquish a child for adoption through the Department of Communities.

Women and Newborn Health Service, in particular King Edward Memorial Hospital are committed to, and welcome the opportunity to further our work with people impacted by past forced adoption policy and practices. We endeavour to continue working with our established group of women with lived experience to inform appropriate steps and agreed strategies as we move forward together.

The North Metropolitan Health Service is providing free access to medical records for biological parents and their adopted children, who are now adults. We acknowledge there is further work to be done in supporting affected people to access their medical records through the Freedom of Information Act. We are committed to making improvements to the way we provide information and support as a priority action.

King Edward Memorial Hospital is also working in partnership with the group of women to build a memorial on the grounds of the hospital to acknowledge harm caused by these past practices. The memorial will also provide a space for gathering and healing for impacted community and their generational families.

The Women and Newborn Health Service acknowledge that we did not do enough to advocate for vulnerable women in those four decades and we are fully committed to address the impact these actions have caused. Every woman attending our health services is entitled to compassionate care based on our values of truth, openness and respect for diversity.

We acknowledge that the babies of forced adoption grew up not knowing why their parents had been separated from them, or not knowing their true identity. Babies were separated from their parents from the very start of their life, breaking the physical and emotional connection with their family, history and culture. For that we are deeply sorry.

The Department of Health commits to supporting all people affected by historical forced adoption policies and practices, acknowledging that people may seek medical support from many health services across Western Australia, to access care or past medical records.

During care, health service staff, particularly mental health professionals, will provide care through a trauma informed approach to minimise the risk of re-traumatising patients in the process of history taking and ongoing interventions. People affected accessing primary care for longitudinal counselling and clinical care provision would be referred by WA Health through a variety of clinical pathways.

We again acknowledge the role of Women and Newborn Health Service and King Edward Memorial Hospital in the trauma and heartbreak caused by the historical adoption policies and practices. Today as a health care system we are dedicated to improving and advocating for the health and wellbeing of women and newborns.

As the leader in statewide maternity care, North Metropolitan Health Service is committed to continuing our partnerships to fully acknowledge the impacts of past practice.

The Executive Director of Women and Newborn Health Service acknowledges the courage of women to speak publicly and commends their bravery in sharing past and current lived experience. We recognise there is significant work to do, and we are committed to implement any recommendations that support the healing of our community.