

# INQUIRY INTO PAST FORCED ADOPTIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICE

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## SUBMISSION

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission regarding “past forced adoption policies and practices”. Through my longstanding involvement in adoption and post adoption (40 years) I believe that I am in a position to advocate for further changes, and I trust that I can demonstrate this.

All persons affected by ‘forced adoptions’ are owed more than an apology.

All agencies and institutions which have been implicated by past “forced adoptions” need to be fully engaged in addressing the contemporary and comprehensive needs of the survivors of “forced adoptions”.

Access to a variety of services and supports must be readily available to all survivors of “forced adoptions”.

## PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Whilst I am now a retired clinical psychologist, during the 1980’s /early 1990’s, and to a lesser extent since then, I have been professionally involved with women who lost their children to “forced adoption” practices, adopted persons and to a lesser extent, adoptive parents, in a variety of roles and contexts, including research, clinical practice, training, consultation, advocacy, and law reform.

*(Refer to resume for specific details).*

### 1. RESEARCH

Early in 1981, I was employed by Professor Robin Winkler at the University of Western Australia as a part-time research assistant for the then Dept. of Community Welfare’s project on the decision-making processes mothers go through in deciding whether (or not) they will relinquish their child for adoption. At this time, I was a full-time student in the Master of Psychology (clinical) programme at UWA.

Contextually, women were struggling with their decision to relinquish, or not, and local adoption staff were desirous of better accommodating to the experiences and needs of these women. However, Supporting Parents Benefits were introduced in Australia in 1973, and increasingly, attitudes to sex before marriage and single parents were changing, and contraception and abortion were becoming more accessible. Change seemed to be happening relatively quickly. Later in 1981, a significant reduction in the numbers of women who lost children to adoption meant that this project was not viable, and less necessary.

Nonetheless, an early literature review revealed that there was a real dearth of information, let alone research about the longer-term consequences of losing a child to adoption. There was Joss Sawyer’s newly published book from NZ, *Death by Adoption*, a few unpublished dissertations, some

pilot studies, and an increasing number of more anecdotal and/or clinical papers on various aspects of adoption, including the experiences of mothers.

Our attention turned to the need for more reliable (and Australian) data and information about the impact on women who had lost their babies to adoption. I then committed myself to this being the topic for my master's thesis, with Professor Winkler as my academic supervisor. A lot of reading, meetings and thought went into identifying appropriate theoretical models around which to build the research, and finally in March/April 1982, we were ready to start inviting women to participate in the research. The original plan was to focus on a WA sample of women, have them complete a rather lengthy questionnaire, and to interview those who were available and interested in being interviewed; I was the person to do the interviews, as it was my thesis. We were inundated with responses from all around Australia. It was very clear to us that we had triggered a desire, need and/or imperative in women who had lost children to adoption for their stories to be told and to be heard, and to contribute to much needed change in both adoption law and practice, not only in WA, but nationally. A total of 331 women from all around Australia contacted us with an interest in being involved in the study.

The results of this research can be viewed empirically and anecdotally, from the participants and researchers' perspectives. A total of 213 women from across Australia completed questionnaires, including 92 women from WA. 23 of these women were also interviewed. The data from all the women constituted the national study, which we were able to complete with significant funding and support from the Aust. Institute of Family Studies (1), and the data from the WA sub sample were reported in my master's thesis (2).

Whilst the term "forced adoptions" seemed not to have been identified and/or been in use in 1981/2, I can confidently assert that the majority of the women who participated in our study will have been subjected to punitive attitudes to their circumstances at the time and forced adoption practices. 99.1 % of the participants were 20 years or older (20 to 50+ years) at the time of the study. This means that they lost their children to adoption prior to 1962, which was at least 11 years prior to the introduction of Supporting Parents Benefit (1973), and when policies and practices were punitive and coercive.

The original questions that shaped the research were:

- What are the effects of relinquishment on the mother who loses her child to adoption?
- What factors impacted adjustment to relinquishment?

Some of the significant results of the research were:

- The effects of relinquishment on the psychological health on the mother were negative and long lasting (and did not compare at all well, statistically, with women of similar age and marital status).
- Half of the women experienced a worsening of their sense of loss over periods of up to 30 years or experienced a periodic worsening at times such as birthdays and mothers' days.
- The main factors which made for a worse adjustment to the loss of their child were:

(1). Winkler R.C. and van Keppel M. (1984), *Relinquishing mothers in adoption- their long-term adjustment*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Monograph No 3.

(2). van Keppel M. (1982), *The adjustment of relinquishing mothers in adoption*. Master of Psychology dissertation, University of Western Australia.

- an absence of opportunities to talk and express their feelings about their loss,
- a lack of support in dealing with their loss, particularly from family, and
- a continuing sense of loss for their child.
- Some women reported that they did not experience a sense of loss for their child.
- There was also a significant number (as has now been widely acknowledged) who felt that they had no choice and that their children were forcibly removed.
- Mothers expressed a clear view that their sense of loss and problems of adjustment would be eased by knowledge about what had happened to their child.

Given that this research was 40 years ago, it was framed around the “loss and grief”, and “stressful life-events” literature and research, to help us identify the best questions to ask. If we were to do this all over again in 2023, I believe that we would also have drawn from the more well developed and accepted theories and knowledge about the impact of both trauma and shame.

The terms “birth mother” and “relinquishment” reflected the language used at the time of our early work. In hindsight, these terms minimise the significance of the mother in the adoption scenario and “relinquishment” implies that the mothers decided for their child to be adopted. We now know that most mothers were coerced, were told that they had no other options, and received no offer of material and/or emotional support to effect the option of not losing their child.

## 2. PERSONAL / PROFESSIONAL IMPACT OF RESEARCH

In the early stages of the “birth mothers” research, Professor Winkler and I travelled to Melbourne, at the invitation of the Australian Institute of Family Studies to meet with a group of “birth mothers”, to assist in shaping our research appropriately and sensitively. I recall this occasion as being “super emotionally charged”. We all did our best to contain our feelings, (we were there to listen), but just before the end of our time together (1.5 days), we were all collectively hit by a “tsunami” of sadness and grief, personal and collective. This wasn’t, by any means, the only time when I couldn’t hold back my tears, when sitting and talking with a “birth mother”. I came away from that meeting with an enormous sense of responsibility to accurately record their stories, to report on the results of the research, and to persevere with making a difference.

I have been too often shocked, disturbed and distressed by the stories told to me. Many were indeed tragic, some even more harrowing, with stories of suicide (as told by family members), severe mental ill-health, debilitating addictions, and very troubling stories about relationship estrangements between partners and between family members. There was also an increasing number of reunions, or attempted reunions, between mothers and their children, sometimes with very disappointing and challenging outcomes. I became the confidante for many, who had never shared their experiences with anyone else. I look back and acknowledge that collectively, the stories of the women who shared their stories, and their pain, were very formative, and no doubt changed the course of my professional life, and the way in which I approached my work as a psychologist and my future involvement in adoption.

### 3. IMPACT OF ADOPTION & POST ADOPTION INVOLVEMENT POST 1982

*Please refer to my RESUME attached, for a list of the various adoption and post adoption related activities and roles undertaken from the early 1980's to 2021.*

The more I became professionally involved in adoption and post-adoption, I became very aware of the wider implications of “forced adoptions” and how they had impacted, long-term, on not only “birth mothers”, but also adopted persons and adoptive parents. They too were affected by the punitive practices and policies of the “forced adoption” era. The shame, secrecy, denial, pretence, guilt, grief, and trauma are only some of the damaging legacies that I have witnessed, impacting all survivors, in all aspects of my post-adoption work. One of the most outstanding examples of these legacies was the fact that many adoptive parents felt unable, or unwilling, to tell their adopted children about their adoption story, with widespread and deleterious consequences.

In conclusion, I wish to list some of my beliefs and values that have been shaped by the experiences of those impacted by “forced adoption” practices, in the hope that they may influence future policies and practice:

- Contemporary and any future adoption practices, and post adoption services, must be informed and shaped by the damaging legacies of “forced adoption” practices.
- Apologies are a beginning, but of themselves, they are inadequate inadequate, when the personal and societal costs have been so extensive and pervasive.
- Society has a responsibility to comprehensively address the needs of the survivors of “forced adoptions”. It should be mandated to involve all agencies and institutions that are implicated by “forced adoptions” and for them to be available to all those who have survived “forced adoptions”, in whatever ways are considered appropriate and/or acceptable..
- Every person should have access to information about themselves including information about their personal histories and family / kinship ties.
- A multi modal approach, from multiple providers will ensure that as many “forced adoption” survivors can access the services that will best suit their needs.
- All children have the right to grow up identifying with and belonging to a loving family, ideally their original family, and to grow up with the safety and security that derives from healthy attachment and bonding to at least one parent/parent figure.
- Becoming a parent is not a right, and it is no person’s right to adopt a child /create a family, to the detriment of any other person.
- Children are not commodities. All adoption practices must be child-centred and be guided by the perceived best interests of a child. When a child’s best interests are undermined or overlooked, their emotional / psychological development is undermined, as are their potential relationships with others, including their “birth parents”.
- All persons in an adoption arrangement (past, present and future) are interdependent, each must be treated with the utmost respect and frankness, by each other and by all personnel involved.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

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(Retired Clinical Psychologist)

Attachment: RESUME (adoption activities etc have been highlighted)