

Helen Margot Murphy
[REDACTED]

Hon Peter Foster MLC
Chair, Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Parliament House
4 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

27 May 2023

Dear Sir,

RE: Inquiry int past forced adoptive policies and practices

Please find following a true and correct recollection of my time in and around King Edward Memorial Hospital Perth (KEMH) from May to November 1968.

I fell pregnant out of wedlock Christmas Eve 1967 to an RAAF cadet named [REDACTED] based at Point Cook, Victoria. At the time I was living at home with my parents in the suburb of Canterbury in Melbourne, Victoria.

In March 1968 [REDACTED] visited me at my family home in Canterbury and suggested to me that "we could get married". However, I knew that at that time RAAF cadets had to be single, so he would have to give up his dream to be a Mirage jet fighter pilot. He was captain of his class and the top student in his academy. That would not be a good start for any marriage and I could see that a divorce would be the inevitable result. Thus, I chose to remain a single mother.

Five months later, in May 1968, I left Melbourne with brother driving my 1954 Morris Minor heading to Perth to be near to [REDACTED] who was being transferred from Pt Cook Air Base to RAAF Base Pearce in Perth in June 1968. My mother refused to have me remain at home and my father said, "I can't go against your mother." We spent 8 days travelling via often unmade, muddy or corrugated roads. They were long days on the road.

I was 23 years old and had only ever wanted to be a mum.

I trained in nursing at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, graduating 1966 and registered and working as a State Registered Nurse.

My first appointment at KEMH was with a social worker, a [REDACTED], which had been arranged by my mother. My first medical appointment was booked in KEMH public

[REDACTED]

outpatients. Given that I had private hospital and medical cover, this in itself was quite bizarre and unexpected. The Nursing Sister on duty took delight in calling loudly for me as “Miss Spicer” for all the other patients to hear – great amusement for them, mostly barefooted Indigenous women. Having grown up and lived my whole life in Canterbury, Victoria, being surrounded by Aboriginal women came as a shock, having never been exposed to Aboriginal people before. While embarrassed & annoyed at her attempt to belittle me, I would not be bowed.

I was shown into a curtained cubicle surrounded by the other patients, and attended by [REDACTED] and 6-8 attending students for my first internal examination. This experience was, in itself, traumatising. Thereafter, due to my private hospital and medical cover I continued to see [REDACTED] in his private rooms. He was a very gentle obstetrician whose care was amazing and he continued to provide my post-natal care.

The pressure to adopt my baby was huge. A WASP baby from a tertiary educated Canterbury woman and a privately educated from father from Sydney’s north shore was a highly desirable commodity in the adoption world. While, I believed that it was wrong, and went against my wishes, I was led to believe that adoption was the only alternative for my baby by the social worker and my family.

Financially, the “Labour Exchange” (ie. Centrelink) paid me \$16.80 per fortnight. And, I received \$16 a fortnight from the baby’s father, however unit rental was \$44 a fortnight, leaving a significant shortfall. My plans, prior to falling pregnant were to travel to the United Kingdom where I intended to work as a nurse, and I had been saving accordingly to make this trip. In my time in Perth, my savings steadily dwindled. My dear brother transferred from the Commonwealth public service in Sydney to a similar Perth office. He supported me financially and emotionally during that time and has never really recovered from his own trauma of the pressure to adopt from our family and the social worker and the events that he experienced while in Perth with me. Years later he would said that he “couldn’t bear to see you deteriorate from his bright little sister to a gaunt sad woman.”

On the evening of Saturday 21 September at about 11.30pm my waters broke and I went into labour. After a quick shower and nightie change, my brother drove me to KEMH, arriving about 12.30am. I was admitted and taken into a prep room where I was left alone by the attending Nursing Sister, who was not at all nice or helpful. I had to say over and over that I felt like vomiting and was simply told by the nursing that the feeling was “common”. She eventually gave me a kidney dish and I was very sick. Asking for a pan I received the same reply, “that’s common”, and again, after some time, she finally given one and then left me on the examination table with it, before leaving the room. I was in intense pain and calling out in agony. The Charge Sister arrived and said indignantly, “What’s all this noise about?!” I replied, “I’m having a baby!” A quick look by her and she said, “she’s crowning.” At which point I was attended by the Charge Sister and the Nursing Sister. My brother was kept in the waiting room.

My son was born at 2.15am Sunday 22 September 1968 after a brief 2 and ¾ hour labour – my first baby. It was very quick, very intense and I felt very frightened being left alone in the prep room where I had the baby. He was immediately removed from the prep room. I have

no other recollection or conscious memory of the aftermath of the birth until I was in an anteroom, prepped to be taken to the ward by an orderly. The baby was swaddled in a crib up against the opposite wall a couple of metres away, out of my reach. My brother was called in to see me in the anteroom. He was told to stand at my head. A nursing sister came in and gave me a powerful sedative, maybe Pethidine. When she left the room, the baby and crib were gone – I don't know where as I was not told!

Stupefied from drugs and the labour I slept and woke next morning at about 6am in a shared ward with about 16 other new mothers. Babies were being wheeled in to be fed by their mothers, but not mine – this was heartbreaking and extremely confusing to experience. Later that day the Charge Sister came and apologise to me, saying, “no one expected such a quick delivery.” I spent the remainder of my time in the ward sobbing uncontrollably.

A female photography came to my bedside at 9am on Monday morning to take photos of new mothers and their babies, but was hurriedly moved on by the nursing staff, being told, “no photos here!” She looked devastated.

I kept asking to see my son and was refused until about four days later. I was taken up and down lifts and corridors and permitted to view him through the nursery glass window. I was permitted no touching, no holding, no feeding and there was no way that I could ever find the nursery in the hospital maze. It is remarkable to me that it is now illegal to remove puppies from their litters until they are six weeks old, but not my human baby!

Denied his first milk, I develop engorged breasts and hot hard lumps that were extremely painful! The obstetrician, [REDACTED] explained that he would not prescribe Stilboestrol, as was commonly prescribed to dry up mother's milk, as he said, “this drug is known to cause breast cancer in later life.” Not so lucky for many other single mothers of the time. Instead I suffered being treated with hot showers and poultices. Sobbing in pain, bereft and receiving no sympathy as a single mother, I was treated like a pariah. I was shown no compassion. I battled to maintain my personal pride.

I was discharged from KEMH on Saturday 28 September 1968.

Taking a form every fortnight into the Labour Exchange, stating I had not worked for that fortnight, I soon became used to the attitude of public servants to me as a single mother. The public servants were seated in a room like a long classroom. Sent to the person in the back row, I had to pass all those staring, disapproving looks of distaste. How superior they looked. I kept a straight back and held my head high. There but for the Grace of God went I.

Following discharge from KEMH hospital, the pressure was on from the social worker to sign the adoption papers. This went against everything I felt and believed. I felt strongly that it was wrong for me and my son to be separated and for him to be raised by others, when I was fully prepared to raise him as my own.

My brother and I went to a prearranged appointment at intimidating legal offices to sign the adoption papers. The suited gentleman behind the desk refused to accept my signature as he said it would be, “unacceptable” as I was “too emotional and clearly doing this under

duress.” So not acceptable!! Stupefied we went home and there was more pressure and all the reasons why it was “good for the baby” to be adopted out were given to me over and over. By now I had little to no money, was emotionally drained and completely dependent on my 25 year old single brother. There was huge pressure on him from both the social worker and our family, this was a huge responsibility for him, from which he suffered considerably. At the second appointment, I reluctantly and under duress, signed the papers. At that time, I was doing it to protect my brother from further suffering.

It was not until November 1969 that [REDACTED], the baby’s father, signed the adoption papers. All that time grieving and, legally, he was still mine and should have been available for me to raise. I only discovered this when I received the adoption papers in the year 2000.

At the time there was no social security benefit for single mothers, my family had said that they would deny me any family support, I had no support from the father, no income, no more savings and no childcare for babies under 18 months of age in 1969.

When I saw [REDACTED] for my post-natal check and asked him about the legalities of the adoption, he said, “I can’t help you with the adoption legalities, I think that you would benefit from seeing [REDACTED].” I met with [REDACTED], who turned out to be a female psychiatrist, who promptly advised that I “should be admitted to The Mount Hospital in Perth”, which I was admitted to later that day or very shortly after.

[REDACTED] was my attending Psychiatrist at The Mount Hospital. On admittance to The Mount, the Nursing Sister on duty handed me some pills. When I asked what they were, she said, “just take them because they’ve been prescribed by the doctor.” I refused, as, as a trained nurse, I wished to know what it was that I was being asked to take. I was classified as a “difficult and uncooperative patient”. I was given a single room, which I do not remember ever leaving nor seeing any other patients. Nor was I provided with any counselling or therapy sessions that I recall.

I do remember that during my stay at The Mount, [REDACTED] visited, stood by my bed and said, “I don’t love you, I’m not going to marry you and I will never see you again” and walked out. Feeling shocked, confused and in a panic, I ran after him. I was quickly surrounded by nursing staff and forcibly overcome. I was injected with something that I suspect was Paraldehyde, and fell unconscious.

To this day I have questions that include:

- How did [REDACTED] know that I was in The Mount Hospital?
- Who told him to come and visit and say what he did? I do not believe that this was something that he would do of his own volition. In my mind our relationship had already ended. This was not something that my family would orchestrate, as they were determined to keep the two of us apart and allow no contact between us. To my knowledge, only [REDACTED], the social worker, had his details.
- Was this on [REDACTED] orders, to shock me out of any hope for a different future?

I remember that my brother visited with some friends. Later they said to me, “you looked so funny, your head was rolling around the pillow and your eyes couldn’t focus”.

Other than this I have to memory of my time at The Mount, I was sedated the whole time.

When I was to be discharged from The Mount, I rang [REDACTED] the social worker to say that it was clear to me that the adoption was wrong and that somehow I would find a way to raise my son. She promptly told me that that couldn’t happen as the future parents were dressing him to take him home. To which I said, “he will just have to be undressed then!” At this moment in time he was still legally my child.

On my discharge from The Mount I was prescribed Tryptanol (the “upper”) and Valium (the “downer”) which I continued to take daily for the next six months under the strict supervision of my mother.

I went home to the flat I shared with my brother in a taxi. My brother was out and the house was a mess from he and his friends. He never came back. I took a handful of tablets and slept until the next day. [REDACTED] telephoned me to check on my well-being, and being concerned rang my mother to fetch me. The following day, my mother arrived in Perth to support me I thought, only to pack up the unit, put my car on train transport and prepare to fly with me back to Melbourne.

When my mother and I visited [REDACTED] at KEMH to finalise everything, we were walking out and I said, “he’s just in there Mum.” She took me by the elbow and said, “just keep walking dear.” Something in my chest broke and I realised that there would be no relenting, no hope and no longer the loving mother I had had in childhood. It took many years to be able to be able love and trust my mother again.

I sobbed uncontrollably for the entire flight and only stopped when I was in my father’s arms and felt safe for the first time in many months. It was now November 1968.

On my return to Melbourne I took a job in the city away from hospitals, as my mother insisted that I, “keep busy and resume [my] life as if the birth never happened.” So naïve, yet this was the advice my mother received from our Melbourne GP. I was still traumatised and bereft, and so my GP referred me to Malvern Psychiatric Clinic where I was subjected to two courses of Electro-Convulsive Therapy (ECT), that I was extremely resistant to. Heavily medicated for many months now, I was convinced by the attending medical practitioners that there was “something wrong with me” that needed to be treated medically. For the third course of ECT, once at the clinic I refused treatment, and the attending Psychiatrist explained that to my mother that if she didn’t sign a voluntary certification, he would have to sign an involuntary certificate which would mean that the State of Victoria had complete control over my medical treatment. I felt powerless and terrified. I was transferred to Larundel Psychiatric Hospital, Bundoora in Melbourne, May 1969, for further assessment. Here there was high security, including grills on every window, double locked entranceways and thick security doors. It was very frightening. I was sedated, again I assume with Paraldehyde, and awoke the following day on a mattress in a high ceilinged otherwise empty room wearing a hospital gown. This was deeply distressing. I remained trapped there for 10

more days. This 10 days of horror was a direct result of the coercion and manipulation that I experienced while in Perth under the care of KEMH medical staff.

While an inpatient (incarcerated) in Larundel, the attending psychiatrists ceased the prescription of Tryptanol and Valium that had been prescribed by [REDACTED] at The Mount Hospital in Perth, and instead prescribed Largactil, a low dose mild sedative. This in itself led to a dramatic improvement in my presenting condition.

I refused group therapy as I was convinced that there was “nothing wrong with me”. A group of about six doctors questioned, counselled and listened to my story. Following which, they called my parents and me to a meeting and told us that I had no and had never had any form of diagnosable mental illness, and that I had experienced and was suffering from the effects of deep trauma, grief and loss. That the grief and pain did not end with the birth and adoption. They advised my parents to take me home, to love me and nurture me.

A month after my discharge I had a follow-up appointment with my attending Psychiatrist from Larundel, who asked me, “how are you feeling?” I said, “well, if I’m seeing a psychiatrist, then there must be something wrong with me.” He said, “you don’t have to see me ever again, but if you feel unwell, please make an appointment.” There were no further follow-up appointments, and, soon after, I ceased taking Largactil, and have taken no similar medications since this time, July 1969.

Some years later, in 1973, my elder brother told me that [REDACTED] had died in May 1972 [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I was married in 1975, to [REDACTED] and my second son [REDACTED] was born in 1975, and my daughter [REDACTED] was born in 1977.

There are still many times when the tears flow for the fate of [REDACTED], our child and the ripple effects of sadness to so many others, in particular my husband and the two children we had together included. There has been great subsequent distressed caused to and conflict between my siblings since we experienced the adoption practices in Perth.

When my first son was 21 years old, I contacted the Western Australian department of community services (or some such), who contacted my son on my behalf. They said that he met with them and they told me that he was not ready to have contact with me at that time, however wanted to assure me that he had had a very loving, supportive family, upbringing and a private school education. It was a great relief to me knowing he was safe and well.

My husband died in 1997.

In 1999 I contacted the Western Australian community services office again to update my address and was told that in 1995 the laws had changed and that adoption papers could be made available to interested parties. Joy oh joy! They were sent to me, providing full details of the adoption process and his adoptive family. This included the information that [REDACTED] had not signed the adoption papers until November 1969.

I checked the Perth phone book and Electoral Roll and, not trusting anyone else to misinterpret the reasons why he was adopted, I wrote to him myself and shared my story with him. He wrote back immediately and we have since remained in contact. It was not until January 2007, when he was 38 years old, that we met at my home in Melbourne and we had a very happy lunch with my other son and daughter.

He was very well educated at private schools and has become a successful well-known businessman that Perth and WA should be extremely proud of. I have not included his name in this submission as I wish to protect his privacy. His name must be protected totally and absolutely. He is aware of this submission.

Nothing will bring back those empty years and continued pain. I was 23 years old, of voting age, and treated as if I had no rights. Should this have been illegal? I would say so.

I ask this Committee to remember that in 1968 an unmarried woman/girl could not be prescribed the pill, so contraception was not totally reliable. In 1968 in Melbourne, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] rightly believing that safe terminations were preferable to “backyard abortions”, had his consulting rooms raided by police. Both he and any female patients found to be terminating a pregnancy were arrested, charged and given a criminal record. Not that I ever considered abortion as I was not prepared to jeopardise future babies.

From 1994 my husband and I became foster carers for other children, and after he died, I continued to be a foster carer for 26 years for many, many other children in need of loving care. In this way, I achieved my childhood dream of being a mum!

I am sharing my story as so many single mothers of that time are not able to share theirs. Many have never told another person of their birth and forced adoption experience, and many have taken their own lives in response to the forced loss of their wanted babies (6% in Victoria according to the research of the Association for Relinquishing Mothers (ARMS)).

I sign this today with my maiden as well as my married names.

Yours faithfully,

[REDACTED]
Helen Margot Murphy (née Spicer)