

14 June 2023

My name is Danae Lee Witherow. Well that's what it says on my legally amended birth certificate which was issued in November 1973 when my adoption was finalised in the Supreme Court of Western Australia. I am a Late Discovery Adoptee. That is the name given to Adopted People who were not advised of their adoption status as children.

My name at birth, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1971, was Elizabeth Pendleton, the name given to me by my birth mother. The name I never knew I had been given.

On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022, when I was aged 50, a conversation with a vengeful ex member of what I thought was my biological family, revealed the truth.

[REDACTED]

You are adopted.

Your grandparents knew.

Your cousins knew.

Your uncle and aunts knew.

Friends of your family knew.

The people you grew up with knew.

Your parents lied to you for 50 years. In fact, my entire family lied to me. No one ever told me the truth.

The State Government of Western Australia knew.

Even now, almost 15 months into discovery, it still takes my breath away. Everyone lied to me. Regardless of being estranged from my adoptive parents for some years, not because of this, they continued to lie to me even when [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

A deception so great that the truth was only to be revealed to [REDACTED] I upon the reading of our Adoptive Parents will. That's how my adoptive parents wanted it even though they had been told to tell us about our adoption when they adopted us. They are still alive. I have not discussed my adoption with them except to have received my adoption papers in the mail. They had 50 years to tell [REDACTED] and I and they chose not to. Some of the lies I have been told over my lifetime are:

Always being told you look like your Adopted Mother (AM). That's totally impossible and a cover up.

Always asking why you got your Father's fat fingers and not your Mother's long fingers. Also a total lie.

Being told by your AM that she's sick of kids blaming their parents for their problems...you caused all my problems by lying to me everyday.

Adoption was discussed in our family. When I became an adult and wanting to travel overseas I thought that I may be able to get a UK Passport as my Grandfather was from the UK. We always knew that he was not my biological grandfather as he married my Grandmother when my Mother

was 18 so he never adopted her. Because of that I was not able to access the UK passport. Again, I was close to the truth but everyone lied.

How is that I am subjected to laws to protect them, and my biological parents, from being identified but they are not subjected to laws to protect me [REDACTED] from being told the truth? Surely there must be protection for adopted people to know their truth. I have heard from another adopted person that back in the 1980's, he and his other adopted siblings received a letter from the Department advising them that adoption laws were being changed and to ask the children if they wanted to sign a document allowing their biological parents to be able to contact them if they wanted.

At the time of my discovery, I was in the process of opening a new business, Premier Hotel Albany, with my partner. Unable to even think of anything else except my newly found truth, our business suffered with our opening being delayed for 2 months while I tried to process all these feelings. That cost an estimated \$500,000 in lost revenue. About a month in to my discovery I realised that if I didn't return to my business then my family and I would end up bankrupt.

On the day of my discovery, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2022, I had a very intense conversation with [REDACTED] who admitted that he knew and that everything I had been told on that day was true. I don't think there are words to even describe how you feel when everything you knew to be true was a deception. A huge hole in the ground opened up and swallowed me up. I didn't think I'd ever crawl out. I drank every night for a number of weeks to try and numb myself from the total heartbreak and pain I was going through. My 11 year old son was so worried about me that he confided in his school teacher who reached out to me to find out if he could help in any way.

On this day, I contacted the Department of Communities and asked them how do I find out who my biological mother and father are. I was told they would send me a form to complete and once returned to them it would take approximately 6 months to find out the truth. **Read that again. 6 months to find out the truth.** I now believe that wait times are 8 to 10 months. How can you seriously suggest to anyone that they need to wait any length of time to find out their basic human right of knowing how they came to be? Can we imagine telling someone that they have cancer but you will have to wait 6 months before we can tell you where it is and to remove it. Just get on with your life and we will get back to you when we have time. It was a slap in the face. The thought of having to wait such a substantial amount of time deterred [REDACTED] from finding out. I imagine that it has deterred many more people.

I was informed that due to my Late Discovery they would endeavour to speed up the process of finding my adoption records. While I was waiting, I did send emails to Rebecca Stephens and Simone Mcgurk to express my outrage at having to wait such a long time to find out my truth. I know that when [REDACTED] was told of the 6 month wait it put him off in finding out his details. I received my information via the telephone on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2022 and subsequently received that in the mail a few days later. In order to access my Original Birth Certificate, I had to wait for a letter that was in those documents that I had to send to Births, Deaths and Marriages along with a fee of \$53.00, again another expense that adopted people should not have to incur.

While I was waiting to get my information, I obtained an Ancestry DNA test kit, which cost \$189. I also now subscribe to the Ancestry website, which costs \$250 every 6 months as I have to subscribe to the International package due to my biological parents being both from the USA.

I reached out to my GP for a referral to a counsellor when I first discovered my truth. The GP charged me \$178, Medicare rebate was \$94.75, my out of pocket expense was \$83.25. Far too

expensive for a Mental Health appointment. I was referred to Relationships Australia where I had a video appointment due to COVID restrictions. That appointment cost me \$30. All I got out of that appointment was the counsellor telling me that I was allowed to feel the way I was feeling. I didn't need to pay for something I already knew. I was not interested in seeing this counsellor again.

As adopted people we should be able to choose our own Therapist not be told that we have to use a therapist from a particular agency or list of providers. This is especially true for Adopted people in the regions where our options are limited. Our Health Funds should also have a policy that Adopted people can access these providers without having to prove that it's medically necessary. Any Adopted person reaching out for mental health help should not be discriminated against choosing the Mental Health provider that works for them.

I was later referred to a Psychotherapist by another Allied Health Professional. This psychotherapist was brilliant. She had experience with other people affected by adoption. As my Health Fund did not recognise her, and I was told that it would have to be medically necessary for them to be able to pay out, I paid for my sessions out of my own pocket. I had 11 sessions in 2022 which cost me a total of \$1485.00. I will continue to see this Therapist when I feel necessary, at a session cost of \$135.00. Adopted people need to find a therapist that works for them, not pick one off a list given to us by a Doctor, Government Agency.

As my Biological Mother lives in USA, Department of Communities where unable to give me much information about her current whereabouts. I started Googling her name, [REDACTED] and her mother's name [REDACTED] (maiden name). I found that [REDACTED] who was born in Western Australia and married a US Navy man, had passed away as well as her husband. I found [REDACTED] was living in Texas, had been married to a man called [REDACTED] in 1973. They went on to have 3 children, the youngest one having died in a car crash. My initial contact with [REDACTED] was over the phone. I had left a message on her mobile phone but she never returned my call. I then rang her husband's number and got through to them. [REDACTED] was obviously shocked that I had found her. I told her I believed that she gave birth to me. She admitted that it was true. She told me she didn't know much about my father. She also told me that her husband and children did not know about me and how would I feel if she didn't tell them. I told her I would be disappointed if that was the case. I tried to explain about my estrangement from my adoptive family. She didn't understand.

She was hesitant to tell her family as she had never told anyone except her parents, not even her 2 brothers. She told me that it was her choice to put me up for adoption but she had no choice as there was no financial help for single mothers. I'm fairly certain that having spent the last 3 months of her pregnancy at Ngala, she was not being told by those in charge such as [REDACTED] that she would make a wonderful single mother. I'm certain that she was told that she had to give up this baby for adoption. I don't even know if she had any contact with her parents that were living in Cottesloe at the time.

I was hopeful of a reunion as she did remember by birth date. I did receive a phone call 2 days later from [REDACTED] telling me that [REDACTED] had told him about me and that in time they would tell their 2 children, my brother and sister. A few emails were exchanged over a couple of months. In September I received an email saying they didn't want to have communication anymore as [REDACTED] is suffering from depression and nightmares because of this. Her situation is exasperated by the fact that her son had passed away in a car crash in 2007. If I had been told in 1989 when I turned 18, I may have had the chance to meet my birth family before his death. He was born in 1989 the year I turned 18. Opportunities that were never given to me. They can't understand my trauma and are of the belief that I should be thankful to my adoptive parents and get on with my life. [REDACTED] had been

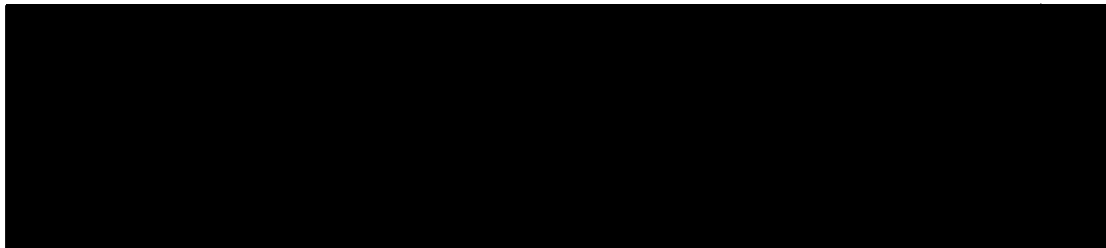
told by her father some time after my adoption, that my adoptive father was a Dentist which is not true at all. I'm assuming that he lied to her in some kind of hope that she would think that a Dentist had the ability to look after me. More lies everywhere you look.

And there I stayed with people whose only qualification to receive a baby was to be married. Where there any checks done on perspective adopted parents? And again in 1974 they did the same thing when they brought another child into their family, [REDACTED]. Never did these people tell [REDACTED] and I that we were adopted. [REDACTED] discovered through a DNA test that he was not their biological son. When confronted, they admitted the truth but refused to tell me as I had stopped communicating with them many years ago. The only reason I was ever told was by my [REDACTED], soon to be ex, as she was divorcing [REDACTED] and wanted to wreak havoc on my life.

It was always a risk contacting [REDACTED] but it was a risk I was willing to take. I don't know how [REDACTED] was treated in Ngala between May and August 1971, but I'm pretty sure that no one including [REDACTED] was telling her that she would make a great mother and that she should take me back to Texas. Instead, I was palmed off to [REDACTED] who according to records received from Department of Communities, had not divulged their plans to their parents. Why were [REDACTED] and I not kept on a "watch list" to see how we were doing later in life?

I reached out to [REDACTED] earlier this year who have also made it clear that they don't want contact with me. Because of my mother's "fragile state" they don't want contact. So totally devastating to me that my own flesh and blood don't want to know me. My son will now not have the opportunity to meet his grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. Adoption doesn't just affect me it will affect my child and his children and it goes on and on. And somehow I'm expected to just get on with my life.

They don't even know me. My son has 6 cousins on my mother's side who he should have a right to know. He should also be able to have contact with his grandparents and his aunt and uncle. I have also requested from this family that they fill in the FOI form from KEMH so that I can see if [REDACTED] was exposed to DES, Stilboestrol, and if I was exposed in utero. I have had a number of gynaecological issues which are still present and also suffer from an autoimmune disease so I need to be checked.



My Ancestry DNA matched with one of [REDACTED] brothers in USA. He made contact with me in November 2022. He has been very kind to me and is keeping in contact with me. He also lives in Texas. He has spoken to [REDACTED] about all of this and is hopeful that things will change in time.

Now that I know that both my biological mother and father are US citizens I would like to be able to access my birth right of a US Citizenship. I am aware that as I was adopted in Australia, I don't have access to US Citizenship. This is another issue that Internationally adopted people face. It shouldn't matter that I was adopted. I have a birth certificate that shows my mother was born in USA. My original birth certificate does not have my father's name on their even though his name was mentioned in many of the documents I received from Department of Communities. I would like my biological father's name on my Original Birth Certificate (OBC).

I have found my father and his daughter [REDACTED] another sibling for me. I had to contact [REDACTED] as I wasn't getting anywhere contacting [REDACTED]. Once I explained to [REDACTED] who I was she rang and we had a lovely conversation. We are still in contact today. [REDACTED] my father, was never told of the pregnancy so imagine his surprise when he was told by his other daughter that I had made contact with her. It has taken [REDACTED] nearly a year to make contact with me again so we are trying to establish a relationship. [REDACTED] lives in Mexico so that has made things much harder. [REDACTED] lives in Colorado. If I am ever to meet them I will have to travel to them Another expense that I shouldn't have to incur.

**Below is some of the information I have gathered over the last 15 months:**

I contacted the Department of Communities to ask about the privacy laws that restrict me identifying anyone involved in my adoption and them telling me that I need to contact a lawyer or Jigsaw or FASS. I don't understand how the very Department that authorised my adoption can not tell me where I legally stand on privacy issues. I did speak with a lawyer through Legal Aid via FASS that I should be careful when using my name in any interviews that I do as I may be breaking the privacy laws in the Adoption Act. My name may identify my adoptive parents. Apparently no one has been charged or taken to court but as it stands it is an offence. The whole Adoption Act needs to be reviewed. I will tell my story. It is a difficult and uncomfortable story to tell but I do it to show other Adopted People that their feelings matter and they should be heard. Australians are aware of the Stolen Generation but they are unaware of this Stolen Generation from the Forced Adoption Era.

Jigsaw is an outdated service. I've contacted them once or twice. Recently I sent off an email asking about their services. They sent me information on LDA's from 1999. It was out of date and very triggering. Surely there is more up to date information on LDAS's. Included in the response was all the fees that you can pay them to get on mailing lists and access other services. It should all be free especially counselling.

I've done radio and print interviews. I've rung several talk back radios. I've done an interview for a podcast. I've contacted RRR Network and the Great Southern Community Resource Centres to get information out to the public about the inquiry and our Great Southern Adoptee Support Group (GSASG). I contact the local paper to update the dates for our next GSASG meeting.

I attended a meeting, remotely, with the then Minister McGurk, along with Jennifer Mcrae and some member of ARMS. In that meeting I spoke to the Minister to convince her that we needed this inquiry. I'm not sure but I don't think she had ever met an LDA. I tried to convey my feelings of desperation of not knowing my truth, how important it is to stop lying and hiding the truth from adopted people. It feels like we have been forgotten. It feels like Julie Gillard gave an apology, which was overshadowed by her losing her leadership, and that adopted people should be thankful for that. That we should just get on with our lives and be thankful that someone "loved us" enough to take us on. I can't call what my AP's have done love. You don't lie to the people that you love.

I'm currently waiting on my FOI documents that I have requested from KEMH pertaining to medical records. As I am unable to access [REDACTED] medical records I am relying on the KEMH staff to go through her records to see if I have been exposed to DES. While I am confident that they are doing their best, they are governed by legislation that makes it difficult for Adopted people who are relying on biological Mothers to tell them the truth or even respond to our requests for more information. The FOI Act needs to be amended so that Adopted people can access medical records that pertain to their birth without having to get permission from their mothers. I have been told by members of staff that record retention from back in those days is not the same as it is today.

Minister Sanderson's Chief of Staff sent me a letter yesterday advising that a review is taking place to assist adopted people in accessing medical records from their birth which may be included in their birth mother's records. I think I am not the only adopted person who is denied access to these records as those mothers are either deceased or want nothing to do with their biological children.

Exposure to DES – How can adopted people find out if they were exposed to DES in utero if we are unable to access the medical records of our mothers? My mother won't have any contact with me so

won't fill out forms for access to her medical records. She went on to have 3 more children after my birth so they should be tested as well. They all live in Texas so good luck with that. More generations of people being denied the truth. So I will have to assume that I was exposed. I have had gyncaelological issues and also suffer from an auto immune disease. Why is it only Victoria that has set up a DES Clinic to track those people who may have been exposed. Annual tests for the rest of our lives. Who can afford that? Adopted people should be issued with a Gold Card from Medicare like our Veterans have. My phycological issues will be with me for a lifetime. I should not have to prove my need to my Private Health Fund or Medicare.

**What I want changed:**

All closed adoptions to be opened. All Adoptees need to be contacted by Department of Communities to make sure they are aware of their truth.

Vetoes must be lifted so that adopted people can know who their parents are. The pain that it has caused the hundreds of people who find themselves not being able to know where they come from. What about their access to their medical history for starters?

No fees to access your original birth certificate.

To have all biological fathers entered on original birth certificates. This should be much easier and is one of the recommendations from the Federal Apology.

No fees to change your name back to your original name if requested.

No fees to revoke your adoption if requested.

No fees to access counselling. Adopted People should have unlimited access to Counselling through Medicare. We shouldn't need to prove that we need therapy because we all do. No end date, just see a therapist as much as you like.

Adopted people should have access to the Gold Card for Medical expenses like Veterans are able to access.

Adopted people need access to a Travel fund similar to the Child Migrants. If I am ever to meet my biological families I will have to travel to Texas, Colorado and Mexico.

Adoption Act amended so that talking about your adoption doesn't invoke Privacy issues.

The Statute of Limitations to be lifted for Adopted people. My adoption occurred in the 1970's but I have only found out in 2022. There should be no limit on time for Adopted people.

The FOI Act amended so that Adopted people can access medical records that pertain to their birth without having to get permission from their mothers.

Financial and mental health support to help Adoptees set up support Groups in the regions in which they live. We don't all live in Perth. Some may be in jail also.

A DES Clinic set up in Western Australia similar to the Victorian one.

Assistance from the Western Australian Government in lobbying the US Government to access my US Citizenship.

Government to stop referring to adopted people as children. We are now adults.

Government to allow adopted people to be consulted on Adoption issues. There is a Sector meeting that is held Quarterly where members from ARMS, ARCS and Jigsaw attend. No adopted people are in attendance. Requests from myself and Jennifer Mcrae have not been responded to,

All 10 recommendations from the Federal Apology be enforced.

To find out if my parents sent a letter in the 1980's letting them know laws were changing and asking [REDACTED] if we wanted to be contacted by biological parents.

[REDACTED]



More staff in the Department of Communities so that wait times to access information is reduced.

Gaining access to your medical records when you request all of your adoption records. At least send the FOI form with those records so people know they can get access.

Support services such as Jigsaw, ARCS, Ancestry provided free to adopted people.

Sometimes there are waves of what did I do so wrong so that one mother deceived me for 50 years and another mother can't bear to communicate with me even though I did nothing wrong. And then that inner little girl starts grieving again but in an adult form. While trying to run a business, be a mother and a wife and a friend and an adoptee advocate and have self worth.

I never asked to be adopted. I never asked to be placed with new parents. I never wanted to lose access to my American heritage. My father was never consulted in his wishes, he was never told of my existence even though his name is all over my adoption records, excluding my original Birth Certificate. Why was my father not contacted to tell him and give him the opportunity to raise his daughter?

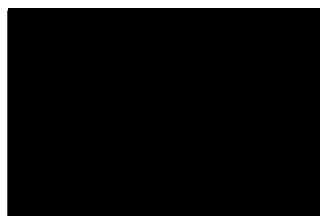
All this secrecy has caused untold damage to myself, my family and all of the other adopted people, some of whom don't even know that they are adopted. It is frightening to me that there are still adopted people who don't know. Time is running out to make contact with biological families. Can you imagine never knowing your mother and father?

The Federal Government apologised in 2013 for all the damage that has occurred but no one ever apologised to me. How can this be allowed to happen? What kind of world do we live in where governments can lie to us about our basic human rights? I urge you to change the laws on adoption. All closed adoptions need to be opened. Government must admit their fault in all areas of this mess I find myself in. Adopted people should have rights just like everyone else. Why do we have to pay to access our original birth certificates, to have agencies to help find our families, to have their names changed to their original names, to have their adoptions reversed, to have their fathers listed on their birth certificate? Why do I need anyone's permission to have my story told or to have my true identity acknowledged.

Along with Jennifer Mcrae, we have established the Great Southern Adoptee Support Group based in Albany. This is a support group for adopted people only where we can meet in a safe place, currently the Premier Hotel Albany., to discuss issues arising from our adoptions. We would like to have financial support from the Government to allow us to expand this group to include more people, help in getting our name out to other adopted people through agencies like FASS and Jigsaw. We hope to be able to run some workshops with guest speakers who can support our health and mental wellbeing.

I am willing to be contacted if you have any questions. It is important that you hear what Adopted People, including Late Discovery Adoptees, have to say. To perhaps be able to feel some of what we feel on a daily basis. Some days are good and some days are not. Triggers are everywhere and you just don't know when you will be set off.

My name is Danae Lee Witherow and I am a Late Discovery Adoptee.





**Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson MLA  
Minister for Health; Mental Health**

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Our Ref 76-24174

Ms Danae Witherow  


Dear Ms Witherow

Thank you for your email of 15 May 2023 to the Minister for Health requesting access to your medical records under the Freedom of Information Act. The Minister has asked that I respond to you on her behalf.

I recognise how important this information is to you and acknowledge how challenging it can be to navigate the process of accessing medical records.

I have queried the Freedom of Information application process at King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH) and I have been advised that patients wishing to access their medical record are required to submit an Information Request Form, along with a copy of photo identification, to the KEMH Freedom of Information department. If you are requesting records on behalf of someone else, you are also required to provide identifying documentation and/or written authorisation permitting you to access the information.

In line with lived experience, the Women and Newborn Health Service (WNHS) is reviewing the Freedom of Information process for people who were adopted and individuals who have been separated from a child by adoption to ensure visible, accessible and compassionate support is provided to access relevant records.

I have been advised that WNHS would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss your records and answer any questions you may have. WNHS will also be best placed to discuss the pathways for screening if required. To arrange a meeting, please contact the KEMH Medical Records team on (08) 6458 1312 or via email at [FOI.KEMH@health.wa.gov.au](mailto:FOI.KEMH@health.wa.gov.au). For further information on the application process, the Information Request Form and specific requirements, please visit the KEMH website (<https://www.wnhs.health.wa.gov.au/Patients-and-Visitors/FOI>).

Thank you for bringing this matter to the Minister's attention.

Kind regards  


13 JUN 2023



# DES EXPOSURE

You have recently been informed that you may have been exposed to DES (di-ethyl-stilboestrol or stilboestrol); that is, your mother was prescribed DES when she was pregnant with you.

Most women will experience a range of emotions when they are given this news. You might be feeling confused or frightened. You may also feel angry or powerless which is totally understandable.

DES exposure is an issue the community is still coming to terms with. It has received very little publicity and there are still only a limited number of health professionals who can provide up-to-date information.

Over the years a great deal has been revealed about DES exposure however there is still the possibility that long-term effects will emerge in years to come.

This means DES daughters require ongoing monitoring for the rest of their lives.

**Nobody likes to be at risk, but with up-to-date information and adequate support you can put these risks into perspective and not let them dominate your life.**

Many DES daughters have found that being informed and taking an active role in their health care lessens their sense of powerlessness. Some women cope by talking with other women while others feel more comfortable with a professional counsellor.

## What medical treatment will I require?

You will need to have regular examinations throughout your life. As this is a specialised area it is important that follow-up examinations are done by professionals who are experienced in the management of DES exposed women.

Never accept any medical intervention, no matter how minor, without being sure that it's absolutely necessary. If in doubt get a second opinion.

## What does the DES examination involve?

The recommended annual pelvic examination for DES daughters involves the following:

- a careful visual inspection and palpation (feeling) of the entire vagina
- separate smear tests taken from the cervix and from the surfaces of the upper vagina
- an internal pelvic examination
- a breast examination.

The examination may also include:

### A Colposcopy

This is an examination that uses a special optical device called a colposcope to magnify the view of the cervix. This examination is non-invasive, as no part of the colposcope will touch you. Staining the vagina and cervix with an iodine solution (brown liquid) may occasionally be necessary.

## A Biopsy

If, on examination, it is found that changes have occurred in the vagina or the cervix and your doctor believes that further examination is required, a biopsy will be taken from the affected area. This involves taking a sample of tissue from the cervix or the vaginal wall. The procedure may be slightly uncomfortable and there may be some slight bleeding afterwards.

## Mammograms

Research is limited on the risks of developing breast cancer for DES daughters, but a 2006 study found a slightly higher risk in DES daughters aged 40 and over. A special DES check-up every year, along with annual clinical breast examination and mammography, once you have reached 40 years of age, is recommended.

## Where to get more information

### The DES Follow Up Clinic

Suite C, Frances Perry Consulting Suites  
2nd Floor, Royal Women's Hospital  
Cnr Grattan St & Flemington Rd  
Parkville VIC 3052  
T: (03) 9344 5077 for an appointment.

All patients of the DES Clinic require a medical referral from a general practitioner and their Medicare card.

### Women's Welcome Centre (Victoria only)

The Royal Women's Hospital  
T: (03) 8345 3037 or 1800 442 007 (rural callers)  
Email: [wvadmin@thewomens.org.au](mailto:wvadmin@thewomens.org.au)

### DES Action, Australia

P.O. Box 282 Camberwell, VIC, 3124  
[www.desaction.org.au](http://www.desaction.org.au)

DES Action is a non-profit, voluntary organisation which operates as a self-help group for DES mothers and daughters. DES Action offers information, support and lobbying for health issues that affect women.

### Related fact sheets on the Women's website

- DES daughters, sons and mothers
- Gynaecological changes in DES exposed daughters
- The later years – for women exposed to DES

# The late discovery of adoptive status

HELEN J. RILEY

**There is emerging evidence of a range of ethical implications lasting many years when a person finds out about their adoptive status as an adult, and that this information about their genetic origins was intentionally concealed from them. The research contributing to this article has been undertaken from within an applied ethics framework, and is cross-disciplinary in nature.**

## Introduction

This article comes in response to a recent contribution to *Family Relationships Quarterly* by Passmore, Feeney and Foulstone (2007).<sup>1</sup> This excellent paper concluded that adoptees who have experienced secrecy, lies or misinformation within their adoptive families may require help in dealing with issues of trust and betrayal. Further, the authors stated that these issues of trust and betrayal often transfer into other adult relationships.

Passmore et al. (2007) also noted that what is important for wellbeing is the extent to which adoptive parents are open with their children, rather than whether the adoption took place in a “closed” or “open” system. Significant numbers of those who were adopted under “closed” systems have subsequently been affected by the late disclosure of their adoptive status. Preliminary evidence is emerging that many of these late discoverers feel that they have not received acknowledgment of the particularity of their experience, the long-term effects of this discovery (involving personal losses and disrupted relationships), or recognition that an injustice may have been done to them.

The current research project focuses on those who have found out about their adoptive status as adults (disclosure must have occurred no earlier than 18 years of age). While this research is ongoing, some preliminary findings may be of interest to those working or researching within the area of family relationships.

## The late discovery of adoptive status

Although mention is sometimes made of the traumatic nature of late disclosure (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000; Passmore et al., 2007), apart from Perl and Markham’s (1999) qualitative study initiated by the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in New South Wales,<sup>2</sup> little research has been carried out in this area to date. The findings of the Perl and Markham study concluded that a majority of late discoverers were continuing to struggle with issues arising from disclosure. This report estimated that up to 9% of the more than 200,000 children adopted in Australia from the 1920s until the mid-1970s could be late discoverers.

Although it is impossible to calculate an accurate figure, even a conservative estimate of 5% exposes the possibility that significant numbers of late discoverers may be affected. As there have been negligible, if any, previous attempts to delineate the parameters of the late-discovery experience, the author’s current research project aims to define, understand and facilitate responsiveness to the complexity of personal, relational and social dimensions involved.

## Method

### Aims

The first aim of the current research was to privilege the voices of late discoverers themselves—to give recognition. The second aim was to delineate the conceptual attributes of the late-discovery experience, and thirdly, to understand what is needed in order for reparation and repair to occur. This need for reparation and repair was first identified by Perl and Markham (1999) and Passmore et al. (2006, 2007), who found that many late discoverers continue to struggle with issues of trust and betrayal, often many years after disclosure has occurred.

1 [www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/n5b.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/n5b.pdf)

2 Of the 99 persons who have contacted PARC about late discovery since July 1995, 40 (34 females and 6 males) agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 82.5% were late-discovery adoptees. They were interviewed by telephone or in person using a questionnaire. The average age of discovery was 38 years, although 30% discovered they were adopted between the ages of 40 and 50. Major conclusions of the study include: 41% were told of their adoption by someone other than the adoptive family, relatives or birth family; 62% never suspected they were adopted, but many felt that it made sense of their family relationships, or that they always felt different; 62% went on to have contact with their birth family; the majority responded with shock at the time of disclosure; and 75% did not require ongoing counselling.

## Participants

Participants in the current research were sourced through Jigsaw Queensland Post Adoption Resource Centre, an online discussion group (in Australia and the United States), media (Queensland only) and a website.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that stories have also been gathered from late-discovery donor-conceived offspring as part of this current research project, although preliminary findings are not included in this paper. It can be noted, however, that late-discovery donor offspring stories express similar themes involving betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving.

Participants were invited to send their stories in written form, although two stories were obtained through taped personal conversation. Twenty-two stories were received. Of the fifteen female participants, twelve were Australian, and one each were from the US, Canada and the UK. Of the seven male participants, four were Australian and three were from the US. Their current ages range from the early 40s through to early 70s. The length of time since disclosure ranged from 1–10 years ago ( $n = 12$ ), 11–20 years ago ( $n = 6$ ), 21–30 years ago ( $n = 3$ ), and 41–50 years ago ( $n = 1$ ).

## Limitations and assumptions

This research is focused on the nature of the late-discovery experience for study participants. It is not concerned with verifying what has occurred, highlighting differences, or attempting to assess to what extent or to what degree a late discoverer may have been affected. Rather, the focus is on the features, characteristics and attributes of the experience. A further limitation of the study is that participants were recruited via non-random methods. Therefore, bias due to self-selection is an issue and the generalisability of the findings is limited.

In any research, it is acknowledged that the researcher brings prior understandings to the project. In this case, the researcher is also a late-discovery adopted person. While this may inevitably bring particular understandings of the late-discovery experience to this research, it can also provide a richer, more nuanced approach.

## Late-discovery stories

The current research supports and extends the major themes outlined in Perl and Markham (1999), as well as the more recent research by Passmore et al. (2006, 2007). What emerges through situating these stories within an ethical framework, however, is the depth and significance of the feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving. These feelings are often still being experienced, despite many years or even decades having passed since disclosure.

Late discovery stories clearly evidence the depth and significance of these feelings.

Karla<sup>4</sup> (aged 40, 5 years since disclosure) discovered her origins as the result of a family health crisis. “I felt profoundly betrayed”, she said, “the brunt of a 40-year joke”. She described being “obsessed with the unfairness of state-sanctioned laws that prevented me from access to my original birth certificate”. She acknowledged that this was a life altering event for her, likening it to the “hero’s journey” in mythology. “I am forever changed”, she said. She is “less mad [now] about being lied to, although this event still colours everything about my identity and my relation[ship] to my family”.

Feelings of betrayal can occur from having had a “false” cultural identity imposed. “I had fair skin and didn’t know I was of Aboriginal descent” said Markus (aged 47, 19 years since disclosure). He now feels disconnected from both of his worlds. “I am rejected by a society that doesn’t understand me because my skin colour is an enigma to both races. A black man with a fair skin creates its own oddities between cultures.”

Brenda (aged 66, 11 years since disclosure) had the secret revealed by accident by an elderly cousin. She described feeling “absolute disbelief, let down, lied to ... I had been mistrusted by not being told the truth and had spent my life living a lie”. Cameron (aged 45, 14 years since disclosure) found out accidentally upon the death of both his parents. He wrote that he spent hours staring at himself in the mirror, thinking “my whole life was a lie”. He talks about how he internalised the “wrong” and made it about himself. “I have done a lot of personal growth work [since late discovery] and everyone says I have changed a lot”, he commented.

Sally (aged 57, 8 years since disclosure) finds it hard to forgive her adoptive mother. “Not that she adopted me, but the way she handled it and continues to handle it is unforgiveable”, while Peter (aged 50, 10 years since disclosure)

3 It may be argued that those who have responded in this current research might be more likely than others to (a) join a support group and/or (b) tell their story. Those that join support groups or are able to tell their story in some other way would be better regarded as fortunate in locating such support and information, given the lack of knowledge and understanding about late discovery in the community (this includes the broad adoption community as well). Many who contacted the author as a result of media stories commented that they had never spoken to another late discoverer or known of any information or support groups that were available.

4 Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

revealed that he has spent the last ten years in shock and anger. He has “severed all ties with that part of [his] family”.

## Discussion

Brison (1997, 2002), Bracken and Thomas (2005) and Walker (2006) have asserted that talking about a “traumatic” event, and being heard and acknowledged, are pivotal features for achieving repair and recovery.<sup>5</sup> Brison (1997) commented that there can be enormous difficulty “regaining one’s voice, one’s subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or worse, made into someone else’s speech, an instrument of another’s agency” (p. 23). This sense of disrupted or subverted agency is a core feature that emerges in late-discovery stories.

The preliminary findings of the current research project, when combined with the previous findings of the PARC report in 1999, demonstrate that, while the majority of late discoverers appear to have been relatively successful in dealing with their experiences and continue to live productive lives, they continue to express feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving. They experience an ongoing sense of distance from others (aloneness), feelings of rejection, bitterness and frustration, and regret for lost opportunities and relationships (“if only!” or “what if?” questions). Many make demands for rights with respect to knowledge of genetic origins or to not have a “wrongful” identity imposed.

**While the majority of late discoverers appear to have been relatively successful in dealing with their experiences and continue to live productive lives, they continue to express feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving.**

It seems clear that part of resolving these feelings and demands should involve recognition from others (individuals, their communities and institutions) that the late discovery of adoptive status is a legitimate matter of interest and concern. This should also include acknowledgment that an injustice was done to the adoptees, even in cases where the decision to conceal genetic origins was taken with the best of intentions. Until such recognition is offered, and agency is restored, many late discoverers are likely to continue to have difficulty regaining self-respect, trusting again, feeling hope, feeling safe or forgiving. Bracken and Thomas (2005) refer to this as a powerful moral quest for justice.

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<sup>5</sup> Brison is referring to her own rape and assault. Bracken & Thomas are referring to post-traumatic stress disorder, while Walker discusses the effects of torture.

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