

NEWS

Child sex abuse inquiry: Health authorities knew of sex abuse allegations against Sydney doctor years before he was deregistered

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A Sydney doctor who masturbated boys in his care during the 1970s and 1980s was not deregistered until 2013, a royal commission has heard.

Dr John Rolleston was convicted of more than 20 child sex offences committed at two private practices and Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital (RNSH).

In her opening address, counsel assisting the commission, Dr Hayley Bennett, said some of Rolleston's victims began complaining to the Health Care Complaints Commission as early as 1998.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has begun hearing evidence on how RNSH dealt with the former GP and allegations made by an outpatient against a hospital psychologist in the late 1960s.

The inquiry in Sydney will also hear how Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital responded to an allegation of child sexual abuse made against a hospital volunteer.

The commission heard from a man who said he was threatened when he tried to report being indecently assaulted by his family's doctor in 1977.

The witness, known as AWA, was 15 when he began seeing Dr Rolleston at his Sydney practice in 1974.

Victim threatened when making complaint, inquiry told

He described seeking treatment for the common cold, and being indecently assaulted on three separate occasions.

"Dr Rolleston told me the reason he was masturbating me was in order to get some liquid from my penis," he said.

On the third occasion when AWA was abused he said: "Why are you doing this when I only have the common cold?"

AWA said: "Dr Rolleston said he needed to examine the clear fluid from my penis to discover what was really wrong with me" and became "more than agitated" by his question.

AWA never returned to Rolleston, and later discovered that his brother had also been abused.

In 1977 he called the New South Wales Medical Board to make a complaint. At the time AWA was in his final year at school.

He told the hearing a male official threatened him on the phone and said: "If you try to make a complaint against one of our members, we will come down so hard on you, we will see you so that your head is so far up your arse you won't see the daylight for years."

AWA said silence followed and the phone call ended.

AWA said he tried to report the matter to several different medical authorities over the years and found their responses were inadequate.

"There is no clear point of contact for someone who wants to report something of this serious nature," he said.

"My recommendation to this royal commission is that there must be a publicly recognised single avenue for a person to



PHOTO: Dr John Rolleston committed more than 20 child sex offences at two private practices and Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital. (Tracey Nearmy: AAP)

MAP: Sydney 2000

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AWG, witness at the royal commission

follow through.

"Even when this fails and someone calls the incorrect medical authority, the various bodies must know who to refer the complainant on to."

'Shattered landscape of broken relationships'

A second witness known as AWG told the commission he too was indecently assaulted by Rolleston.

AWG said he visited the doctor in the Sydney suburb of St Ives in 1974 when he was a 14-year-old who had exaggerated a sore throat to try to skip school for the day.

He told his parents about the assault and his mother sought advice from two other doctors she respected.

AWG told the commission the first doctor warned his mother that "it would be difficult to raise allegations and question the family doctor because he was a respected member of the community and that it would be unlikely that her word would be believed over Dr Rolleston's".

AWG said the doctor said "words to the effect 'You can't win on this'".

The abuse had a profound impact on AWG who described a "shattered landscape of broken relationships and damaging behaviour as a youth".

"I wonder how much of my past can be attributed to being a trusting 14-year-old boy being sexually molested by my family doctor," AWG said.

"Who can you trust if not your family doctor?"

"I'm so proud of the brave men who started the criminal proceedings and saw it through.

"In my mind there are two questions: 'Why do paedophiles do what they do?' And 'why do people in power let it happen?'"

Rolleston was convicted in for molesting 17 boys and his sentence was due to expire in June 2015.

Rolleston worked as doctor in St Ives and Royal North Shore Hospital as well as other parts of the state, including Broken Hill, between 1969 and 1984.

'What would it take to get a life ban?'

A survivor of abuse by Rolleston told the royal commission medical authorities should have mandatory reporting policies when historic cases are raised.

The man known as AWB told the Sydney hearing that he suffered multiple indecent assaults by Rolleston at his St Ives doctor's surgery in Sydney's north, and at the Royal North Shore hospital, when he was a teenager.

He cried when he told the commission: "I did not consider myself a sexual being when it happened. I was a young, innocent, uncomplicated boy who didn't really understand what was going on."

AWB said he contacted the Medical Board, the Australian Medical Association, the DOCS and the ACCC and found it "too difficult. You had to formalise a complaint or nothing".

"I'm also dumbfounded that the relevant authorities only saw fit to ban Dr Rolleston for four years after the criminal conviction had taken place. And I suppose I'd pose the question - what would it take to get a life ban?"

There's still some fear of retribution, there's still the 'closed club' about mandatory reporting.

Merrilyn Walton, former health care complaints commissioner

Inquiry will 'give patients a voice'

Merrilyn Walton, the first health care complaints commissioner in New South Wales, who served from 1993 to 2000, said the inquiry would give patients a voice.

"Patient's voices have traditionally been excluded from looking at regulatory operations, and their voice is an important one. Their experience can teach us an awful lot," said Professor Walton, who now lectures in medical education and patient safety at the University of Sydney.

"There's still some fear of retribution, there's still the 'closed club' about mandatory reporting. So I think what this does is exposes the extreme vulnerability of children to the extent that the system needs to pay attention to that.

"And if they don't have the existing mechanisms in place, then they should put them in.

"So what I hope will happen is that when a complaint is made on behalf of a child, for example, that more attention is paid to that, because historically it's been quite easy to dismiss their voice, easy to discredit, easy not to substantiate.

"So in those cases we need to be more attentive, more careful, more diligent."

Nine alleged abuse victims to give evidence

The inquiry will hear from nine people who say they were abused in private medical practices and public hospitals.

The alleged perpetrators also include a psychologist who worked at RNSH in the 1960s and 20 years later as a volunteer at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne.

Carolyn DeWaegeneire complained to the Health Care Complaints Commission (HCCC) in 2007 about the former doctor, Graeme Reeves, who worked on the NSW far south coast.

He was eventually jailed after the district court found he had unnecessarily removed her genitals.

Ms DeWaegeneire has criticised the way the HCCC handled her case as an adult patient and she fears the response could be even worse for children.

"It's the easiest thing to just put a blanket over the top and shove it under the 'not to be disturbed' drawer at the bottom at the back of the file. It's so easy," she said.

"Just ignore it and get rid of it. Don't forget that a little person cannot, on their own, fight."

But Professor Walton said she was confident the HCCC was doing its job properly.

"When I was the director of the complaints unit and the health care complaints commissioner, there was no evidence of wanting to conceal complaints or not investigate complaints that should be investigated. Indeed, it was the opposite," she said.

The HCCC declined AM's request for comment, but a parliamentary committee found it had improved its operations after the initial complaints about Mr Reeves.

Commissioner Kieran Pehm will be called to give evidence before the royal commission.

Representatives from the NSW Medical Council and the state's Health Department will also appear.

The CEO of the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Professor Christine Kilpatrick, released a statement guaranteeing that the revered institution was safe.

"We are compliant with every legislated safeguard, including working with children checks and mandatory reporting, and go beyond mandated regulation, with comprehensive policies, procedures and strict codes of conduct," she said.

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