

## **AMwith Michael Brissenden**

Monday to Saturday from 8:00 am on ABC Local Radio and 7:10 am on Radio National.

# Health care providers to be scrutinised at child abuse royal commission

Thomas Oriti reported this story on Wednesday, May 6, 2015 08:12:36

**MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:** Some of the most respected hospitals in Australia will be put under the microscope at the latest public hearing of the child abuse royal commission.

The inquiry in Sydney is expected to hear from former patients who were molested by medical staff and volunteers in New South Wales and Victoria.

Representatives from the hospitals and their governing bodies will be called to give evidence in what could be one of the most disturbing cases so far.

Thomas Oriti reports.

**THOMAS ORITI:** They're supposed to be places where children feel safe but the royal commission is about to expose a dark side to the history of some of the nation's hospitals.

**MERRILYN WALTON:** Patients' 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.

Merrilyn Walton is a professor of medical education and patient safety at the University of Sydney. She was also the first health care complaints commissioner in New South Wales from 1993 to 2000.

**MERRILYN WALTON:** 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.

**THOMAS ORITI:** The inquiry will hear from nine victims who were abused in private medical practices and public hospitals.

The alleged perpetrators include a psychologist who worked at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital in the 1960s and 20 years later, a volunteer at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne.

But the commission will begin with evidence from a number of survivors who'd reported abuse to the Health Care Complaints Commission about one particular medical practitioner in New South Wales.

Professor Walton says she's confident the HCCC is doing its job properly.

MERRILYN WALTON: 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.

THOMAS ORITI: Not everyone's convinced.

Carolyn DeWaegeneire complained to the HCCC in 2007 about the former doctor Graeme Reeves, who worked on the New South Wales far south coast. He was eventually jailed after the district court found he'd 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.

CAROLYN DEWAEGENEIRE: 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.

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

THOMAS ORITI: The HCCC declined AM's request for comment but a parliamentary committee found it had improved its operations after the initial complaints about Graeme Reeves. Commissioner Kieran Pehm will be called to give evidence.

Representatives from the New South Wales Medical Council and the state's Health Department will also appear, but they declined to be interviewed.

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

STATEMENT FROM CHRISTINE KILPATRICK: 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.

THOMAS ORITI: The hearing begins this morning.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Thomas Oriti reporting there.

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