

Complaint by Edit re SARC

Without Prejudice

A few days ago I visited my assigned counsellor, (edit), at SARC in (edit). It was my fourth visit to the service. Based on what transpired it will also be my last. I have agreed to an appointment with (edit) on Monday 17/12/2012 to speak about what has happened and discuss other treatment options. I do this with some reservations and frankly I doubt there will be a positive outcome as I can't see myself pursuing other treatment options through government.

Firstly, it's probably important to outline what occurred at SARC on Tuesday, 11th December, 2012. Events that led to this complaint.

After four visits to SARC my counsellor (edit) informed me that SARC was the wrong place for me and referred me to another service. After expressing that I felt the service I was being referred to would be wrong for me – a healthy living group for males - I was referred there anyway. Initially she wanted to refer me to a service in Fremantle. I live in (edit) and I told her this was too far away. She then gave me the number of a similar service in Joondalup. I made it more than clear that I would not be comfortable in a group situation. I also expressed that my presence would likely prove detrimental to a group situation. I believe I expressed several times that I was not comfortable with the idea. This turned out to be strictly academic. When contacting this service (largely to find out more as I knew nothing about it and had pretty much made up my mind not to go) I was told that they couldn't take me because I didn't qualify (you needed to be an existing patient of the service which was a mental health unit/hospital). Further to this, from a professional perspective, given after four meetings where it must have been patently apparent that I am uncomfortable discussing what happened to me in a one-on-one setting, what is a counsellor thinking referring me to a male group for healthy living?

Other worrying things were also said in this meeting/session. When I made it clear I wasn't happy with my treatment/on-referral, (edit) asked me where my abuse occurred (knowing full well the answer to this). I replied New Zealand. She smiled as if to say well what are you doing here then? The way she did this was almost malicious. One quick point... I was abused as an Australian citizen while in NZ State care (I have never even been a New Zealander and was born in Australia and have always been an Australian citizen) – not that this should make one iota of difference. Care is care and duty of care should not come down to ethnicity, race, creed, or any other factor. She also suggested private counselling. Being on the dole this is not possible but then I expect she would know this. Private counselling is prohibitively expensive and certainly not affordable to someone who is unemployed.

E.g. In Emails from Perth based private counsellors who specialise in sexual abuse and trauma counselling, they note:

[Quote]

“Thank you for your email and my apologies for the delay in responding. I am not taking new clients and therefore made contact with two of my colleagues who specialise in trauma to see whether they could offer appointments. Both (name) and (name) who are also at (name) Counselling Centre would be available to see you. They were both concerned, as am I, that it is a big decision to move to Perth given that you are currently residing in Bali. You would be eligible to have appointments under our Medicare system but this is limited with a maximum of 16 appointments currently being allowed. After this you may be eligible for other support under 'a chronic condition' but you would need to explore that with the WA Health Department/Medicare but the rebates under such a scheme are limited. Given your history, it is likely that you would need extensive and ongoing treatment and support beyond the rebate systems available to you. Perhaps the NZ govt would fund you over and above what you may receive under rebate schemes in Western Australia. You will see (name) and (name) profiles on our website and you are welcome to contact them directly if you would like to follow up further.

I wish you all the best.

Kind Regards

(edited)

[End Quote]

And in an email from this person's colleague.

[Quote]

Hello (edit)

(Edited) has asked me to contact you in relation to Counselling sessions.

I would suggest that when you arrive in Perth, you arrange to meet with your GP in order to get a referral to myself (if you choose to see me!) on a Mental Health care Plan. This will enable you to claim a rebate from Medicare for each session. The rebate is about half of the fee which is \$160.00 per hr. Unfortunately you will be limited to 10 rebatable sessions per year thereafter the full fee would apply. Private health funds also offer some rebates.

If you could contact me on (edit) or via email we can then work out an appropriate plan for you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards

(edited)

[End Quote]

Note – *“Given your history, it is likely that you would need extensive and ongoing treatment and support...”*

SARC seemingly disagrees. After four sessions I was referred to a group for healthy living at a service which I don't qualify for.

Keep in mind that I was abused while in government care. As a result I have serious issues trusting government bodies. This situation only serves to reinforce this.

One other bizarre thing also happened at my last SARC session. (edit), for about the third time, asked me where I had worked in government. She had asked me the same question at other sessions (on, I believe, two previous occasions). I stated “Next Step”. She then asked where Next Step was based. Somewhat surprised by her inquisitory tone and again having to answer the same question that I had answered on two other occasions before I replied “Mt Lawley”. She then started arguing the point that Next Step was based in East Perth and not Mt Lawley and that Next Step was called the ADA (Alcohol and Drug Authority) during the time I worked there. Firstly, I have a reference from “Next Step” with the address of Field St, Mt Lawley on the letterhead. I will submit a copy of this reference and ask (edit) to pass it on to (edit). While highlighting this point may seem somewhat personal it isn't. Bottom line... it is a disgrace that a counsellor firstly talks down to and argues with a client, insinuating that they are either lying or have their facts wrong and, secondly, asks the same question on more than one occasion (on another occasion she argued the point also – I really couldn't be bothered trying to correct her). Either way, to clarify, Next Step, now DAO was named as such after being the ADA (Alcohol and Drug Authority). The project I worked in at “Next Step” “ was named (edit) The key alcohol and drug body in Western Australia then was WADASO (WA Drug Abuse Strategy Office) – a Court Liberal Government initiative. The ADA was a Labor Government initiative and was subsequently renamed, at great expense to the WA taxpayer, to Next Step. Next Step was based in both East Perth and Mt Lawley in the late nineties. I worked out of the Mt Lawley base for 18 months between March 1998 and December 1999. I do not feel as if I should need to defend this with a counsellor whose job, at the very least, is to maintain a professional decorum in a client, counsellor relationship.

By the way, not part of my complaint, but more of an unfortunate coincidence – (edit), who is now a Manager at SARC, was a co-worker of mine at Next Step. I feel somewhat compromised as a result and have asked that personal information pertaining to myself – although I expect it is too late – is not put across her desk.

All I can say here is that I am extremely confused by what happened. (Edit) view, as she expressed it, was that as I was unwilling to talk openly about being sexually abused (recall the sexual abuse presumably in blow-by-blow detail) SARC was the wrong service for me. This said, I had stated from the outset of counselling that my aim was to deal with PTSD. I have no idea how to do this but I did explain the symptoms, which can be simply stated as

extreme and constant anxiety which, at worst, renders me completely unable to function. On a more in depth level the symptoms make me, 1) agoraphobic (I spend days indoors at a time); 2) paranoid; 3) reactive and prone to violence; 4) tired; 5) unable to sleep, leaving me sleep deprived; 6) when I do sleep I often have nightmares which wake me up and I can't return to sleep; 7) I feel detached and unable to relate to people. This has resulted in an extreme sense of isolation; and 8) I have had several (maybe 10 -15) what I call spatial glitches. I think these were referred to by a mental health specialist, or doctor as "complex partial seizures". My most recent one was in Perth only weeks ago when I came to realisation while driving along the freeway with no idea of how I got there (I had told edit about this). Basically what happens is I seem to black out and come to, sometimes days later (sometimes within hours). Sometimes my face and fists are busted up, so while it is clear I have been in at least one fight I have no real memory of what occurred (occasionally I have some flashbacks of it but not much of the picture). I think this is a release valve when I am extremely stressed.

On the note of PTSD something needs to be raised here as part of the complaint also. (Edit) informs me that she doesn't like the PTSD label (actually, it was more that she didn't like labels) – seemingly playing down what is known to be a debilitating condition among numerous experts in the field who are extremely qualified, highly respected, published and peer reviewed. (Edit), however, also informed me that she wasn't qualified to (or couldn't) counsel for PTSD, which begs the question why is she even discussing the PTSD "*Label*" when she is completely unqualified to do so? I'll stop just short of saying that I believe this flippant and highly unprofessional approach to counselling makes (Edit) potentially dangerous, but will state that it isn't up to far less qualified individuals to disregard contemporary research/science and, arguably, compromise their client/s well being as a result. PTSD and C-PTSD are integral components of historic and otherwise sexual and/or physical abuse. This, many, many experts agree on. Let's face it, how is a men's group 'for healthy living' going to help me (an individual who is agoraphobic and, in general, doesn't interact well with people) with PTSD?

Further to this, when I had expressed to (edit) at the second session I had with her that I was uncomfortable with talking about my abuse she had, at that time, stated that this was okay. This was turned 180 degrees only two sessions later when I was informed that as I wasn't prepared to talk about my sexual abuse SARC couldn't help.

Other

There are a couple of additional points that I would like to raise as part of the complaint. One is that in my second or third session with (Edit) she kept referring to me by the name of Mark. I corrected her on this, stating - "by the way, my name is (Edit)... not Mark." It seems to me that if you expect to form a professional and trusting relationship with someone in a counselling, client

relationship at the very least you need to remember their correct name and address them accordingly.

Additionally, another thing occurred which was off-putting and what I consider unprofessional from a counselling perspective. I have enrolled in an MA in Human Rights at (edit), beginning next year (2013). (Edit) has asked me on at least two occasions (maybe three) what my degree is in. On both occasions I had told her I have a BA in Photomedia/Media. Having to cover the same ground is less than ideal and speaks of your counsellor failing to listen. This said, no problem (like all of us she is only human). However, when I told her I was doing an MA in Human Rights she questioned me on whether I had worked in Human Rights. I answered "no" (albeit having worked extensively in advocacy and lobbying for illicit drug users rights), adding, "The point of studying human rights is to enable me to work in that field." Her next response surprised me. "How can you do an MA in Human Rights if you've never worked in the field?" The way she pitched this question seemed unusually aggressive and I felt she thought I was lying. Either way her stance and questions were out of order (one doesn't need a degree in psychology to understand this). Of course there's an easy answer. The MA is coursework (4 units a semester fulltime with an internship and thesis component – total of 1.5 years FT study ...student number (edit)) and gives one the skills/qualifications to work in the field (the point of university and other study). In this instance I found her intonation derogatory and undermining. The last thing abuse survivors need is their counsellor attacking their self-belief/esteem. This seems to be a recurring theme in (edit) conduct.

Further, I found something else concerning and unprofessional. That is, I am currently working on a website (www.newzealandchildabuse.com) to give historic abuse plaintiffs in New Zealand a voice and to lobby for a Royal Commission into historic abuse in New Zealand (something the government there is resistant to do due to being sued at this moment by over 800 plaintiffs – myself included). When I spoke about the Australian Royal Commission to (edit), she, for lack of a better word, boohooed it with comments such as "they have known for a long time. Why now?" I found her attitude absolutely unprofessional and a put down on what can only be positive. Let's face it, as a historic abuse survivor, I think I can speak for many others – including 95% of Australians who voted in favour of the commission in a Nielson Poll - the most universally supported poll ever - that those who were raped, abused and beaten in state and other care deserve some form of resolution. On my last session with SARC (edit) stated that, "You know it's only the Catholic Church don't you?" Her attitude seemed condescending and malevolent. Quick point - the terms of reference for the commission will extend far further than the Catholic Church. As Julia Gillard is quoted in the Australian on the 12/11/2012, "This is a royal commission that would be looking across religious organisations, as well as state-based care and into the not-for-profit sector," she said. "So this is not a royal commission targeted at any one church." Raising this may sound personal, but again it isn't. Her comments were out of line and highly unprofessional (fine for lunch room banter with co-workers, while totally inappropriate in a sexual abuse counselling session with a historic abuse survivor).

Based on my experiences I would like to state that I found SARC gender specific, judgemental, brutal and demeaning. Where (edit) is concerned I would state that her behaviour, at times, was bizarre and highly unprofessional. Something I would point out also is that based on the material I have read on sexual abuse counselling, an important aspect of this process is to gain the clients trust and create a non-judgemental and safe environment (one would expect this to be true of any counselling). This is not achieved through, 1) talking down to/belittling the client, 2) arguing with the client, 3) referring the client elsewhere within four sessions and to an inappropriate service they don't qualify for, 4) calling the client by an incorrect name throughout most of an entire session and, 5) placing your own largely uneducated views (opinions) before far more informed scientific opinion.

There's something else I would like to add as an overall. And I believe SARC and other mental health providers need to take this onboard with regards to historic abuse survivors. This is particularly true, given the Royal Commission that is taking place in Australia.

What surprises me throughout all of the mental health treatment I have sought over the years is that I have received, for lack of a better word, such "*crap*" care. Take for example Perth, where I settled in 1989. In 2003, The Swan Mental Health Unit noted on my case notes that I had "*alleged*" that I had been sexually abused in state care. On this note, is it so hard for government "care" workers to understand that not only does this occur, it occurs far too often and unnecessarily due to inadequate system checks, others turning a blind eye, and as a result of cover ups (as happened in my case – all documented in police records)? Anyway, Swan Mental Health then referred me to (edit) – a man who labelled me an "outlier" and put me on Dexamphetamine for ADD, not once discussing my "*alleged*" abuse which was a tiny note among pages of others that Swan Mental Health had sent him. By the way, this so called professional clearly had no idea what an "outlier" is (I have read the book and I fall well within the "sample"). Nevertheless, this is/was a disgrace (and yes it does anger me because I was in freefall – absolutely psychotic - and this led to me losing my job, my home, my long-term girlfriend, my dignity, and ending up homeless for over six years while I tried to heal and run from something I couldn't escape). It finally took a private psychologist to diagnose me with trauma related issues naming it PTSD at that time (an expert in the field of male sexual abuse has since informed me that he believes it is C-PTSD due to "*several threads*"). My then girlfriend's father was paying for the private sessions and ashamed of this (they cost \$130 an hour) I didn't pursue more than three or four sessions with this psychologist. I left Australia in March of 2006 suffering from massive, crippling anxiety and feeling as if I was being hunted. What staggers me now is that no one had diagnosed a trauma related syndrome before (it really was so obvious). My question is, how is it that historic abuse survivors get such lousy care in government organisations? How is it that when we do disclose a major life-changing event (which is extremely hard to disclose due to the shame and disempowerment that goes with it – "castrating" as (edit) called it) this becomes an allegation and isn't explored further? How is it that experts from all over the globe link PTSD and C-PTSD to childhood sexual and physical abuse, and indeed PTSD to rape etc, but there seems so little

understanding of these conditions among government mental health providers in Australia? In a worst-case scenario we end up with counsellors who don't like labels and deny far more informed research. Just as worryingly, as is the case with (edit), how is it that historic abuse and rape survivors get given counsellors who aren't even qualified to counsel for PTSD and C-PTSD when PTSD and C-PTSD is so much a part of sexual abuse and rape (historic or otherwise)? I certainly don't hold (edit) responsible for this – it is the system itself that must be brought into question for providing counsellors with inadequate skill sets and knowledge/training.

What I'm saying is that it is all good and well for Australia to have a Royal Commission but what then? Historic abuse survivors can't even get adequate counselling/care (unless you rate prisons, drug and alcohol rehabs, mental institutions, and cemeteries as adequate). As Julia Gillard stated, “Any instance of child abuse is an evil and vile thing.” Sure! Just as disturbing is that no adequate system is in place to support survivors to heal.

I would request that this formal, written complaint is actioned and that an investigation is undertaken on the part of SARC. Additionally, I would further request that this process is transparent and that findings and outcomes are outlined in writing to myself when the investigation is completed.

Yours sincerely

(edit)