



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT

Private Members' Statements

17 September 2019

Wallsend Mental Health Services

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (17:58):

Thursday 12 September was R U OK? Day. It aims to raise awareness of mental health problems and combat suicide. It is a chance for us to reach out to people in our lives and ask them, "Are you okay?" Mental health problems can be hard to deal with but they are especially hard if you have been going through them alone. That is why it is important to let people know we care, that they do not have to do it alone and we want to help. I congratulate R U OK? champion and chairman Michael Connaghan and the board for running such a successful initiative.

Unfortunately, many in the Wallsend electorate feel that the local mental health services are not adequate. A number of my constituents have come forward to tell their stories. Amber is an incredibly intelligent, hard-working woman with a great young family. She battles with mental health problems. Earlier this year she was hospitalised at the Calvary Mater. She reported that staff were overworked and the facilities were run down. Amber stated:

Patients had to wear ear plugs to be able to sleep over the noise of the doors, which open every few minutes non-stop. They were handed out by staff when you arrived. People are supposed to be resting to recuperate!

She reported that she could not get the care and support she needed there, despite the best efforts of the hard-working mental health professionals. Thankfully Amber's mental health has improved recently but she knows that another downturn will mean a return to hospital.

Nat has been suffering from severe depression and anxiety for most her life. She self-medicated with alcohol and has struggled to keep her drinking under control. Nat recently went to the Mater for a drug and alcohol appointment. Nat took the initiative looking to improve her mental health and physical wellbeing. Despite the severity of her issue the doctor she saw told her to go cold turkey and just take up jogging. This advice was given to someone who cannot even get herself out of the door. Nat has not let this bad experience deter her. She will be going back to the Mater to see a different doctor.

Bella was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in her twenties. She told me that she attended the emergency room at the local hospital three times while in severe manic states—twice before her diagnosis and once afterwards. The first time the doctor told her she had anxiety and should stop reading women's magazines. He wrote off her mental health episode as stress about the HSC. The second time she was handed olanzapine and told to attend the mental health unit at James Fletcher Hospital the next day. Bella reports that she was not told about the medication before being prescribed it and the ongoing issues related to that.

Eventually she was able to see a private psychiatrist and was improving. She had another episode while that doctor was away and presented to the Mater, manic and concerned she was suffering from lithium poisoning. The public psychiatrist she saw there was dismissive of her usual doctor's treatment regime, which was developed to balance symptom management and potential damage to her kidneys. Bella stated:

That particular psychiatrist just wanted to go to the easiest route of controlling something wrong with me. I pay my psychiatrist not just because he's great but because he treated me like a human being.

The people of Wallsend deserve accessible, well-maintained public health care. While support from friends, family and loved ones is crucial it cannot be all that they rely on. "Are you okay?" is only the beginning of a conversation. It is up to us to make sure that if they answer "No" that we give them extra help.