

29 July 1999

Jubilee Room, Parliament House, Sydney

At the request of the witness, this evidence was heard by Committee Members only.

SHIRLEY ANNE FORSHAW, Clerk, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

Mrs FORSHAW: As a birth mother.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the provisions of the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes?

CHAIR: You have prepared a submission?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you want that to be included as part of your sworn evidence?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you want to say anything first or shall I go through the questions?

Mrs FORSHAW: Let us just start and get it over with.

CHAIR: Could you explain to the Committee the circumstances surrounding the confirmation of the your pregnancy in 1969? For example, how old were you, how did you feel about the pregnancy and who did you discuss it with?

Mrs FORSHAW: I was 18 years old when I found out I was pregnant and I attended a doctor - I would not have a clue who - after realising my period was missing for quite a few months. When I found out I was shocked, horrified, frightened, confused, thinking, "What am I going to do?" My boyfriend said he would always help me with anything if that happened, which meant an abortion, but I was too late to have that anyway. We were both frightened of my parents, he not having parents. He was taken away from his family at a young age.

CHAIR: When you say "taken away", do you mean adopted?

Mrs FORSHAW: No. He was taken away from his mother and father and lived with his aunt and uncle. I think it was the child welfare that took them away because they were not being looked after properly. He never got on well with his family so he really did not have anybody and we had to sort it out between ourselves and my parents. We decided it might be a good idea to get married.

CHAIR: How old was he?

Mrs FORSHAW: He was about nine months younger than I was. He was only 17 and because of his age we were not allowed to marry so we spoke to my father and said that we wanted to live together and we would marry after the child was born. Dad suggested that we live together, which we did for a short while. I pretended that I was married but it was just too hard on a 17 year old to remain as a family.

CHAIR: You actually had your own house or flat and tried to support yourselves?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes. My father came down to check things out to make sure it was all right and that sort of thing. My mother was very distant. I did not understand until years later why she was so distant. I went to the Royal Women's Hospital at Paddington with my auntie one day because I knew I had to have prenatal care and the doctor there suggested I see a social worker, which I did, but at this stage I was not adopting my child; I was keeping him or her.

CHAIR: How pregnant were you?

Mrs FORSHAW: I think I was about 10 or 11 weeks when I found out and by the time you get anything done - I was quite angry that he wanted me to have an abortion because by the time I had accepted I was pregnant I did not want an abortion and I was quite mad at him. There was a whole lot of mixed feelings that went through my head.

CHAIR: The doctor said you needed to see the social worker?

Mrs FORSHAW: I did see the social worker but at this time I was not going to adopt. I did not see the social worker then for a little while. I had some friends whom I confided with at work and they were very supportive and they just wanted to protect me and help me where they could. I did leave work eventually. I also confided in one of my neighbours over the road who was really good, and one of my girlfriend's mothers. We used to have all these in-depth chats about the pregnancy that I could not talk about with my mother. She said she was happy but I just had this underlying feeling that she was not and it was something that I just could not talk to her about.

CHAIR: You have partly answered our second question too about how you were seeing the social worker during the early stages of your pregnancy. You said that the doctor just assumed that you were going to have the baby adopted. Did the social worker make that assumption as well?

Mrs FORSHAW: The doctor did not really assume I was having it adopted. He just knew that I was not married at the time, that I was living with my boyfriend and I think he was more worried about how I was mentally, but he did not assume anything. I told him I was keeping the baby, I am sure, and I told the social worker I was keeping the baby. I was getting married later and that was all there was to it. There was no way I was going to have it adopted. My auntie whom I went to the hospital with had had a child adopted as well and she did not want me to see a social worker for that reason but I thought that it was okay.

CHAIR: So people such as your aunt were very supportive of you keeping the child?

Mrs FORSHAW: She knew that I could not but she would have liked me to have at the end of the day as far as over the long term. She would have liked me to have kept the child, yes.

CHAIR: Did the social worker give you advice about adoption and the other options?

Mrs FORSHAW: No, not that I can remember.

CHAIR: Was it just a formality?

Mrs FORSHAW: The first visit would just have been a formality of just getting a general history, background and seeing where I was coming from. It was like an introductory meeting. It was not until after my situation had changed.

CHAIR: Can you tell the Committee about the treatment and support that you received while you were at the unmarried mothers home at the Royal Hospital for Women. First, tell us about the change in your situation and how you came to be at that home?

Mrs FORSHAW: I thought I was trapped; I thought I was trapping the father. I felt guilty, as though I was living a lie. The relationship began to change. We had no money and it was really a big strain. I remember we were supposed to go out one night and he decided to go out with his mates instead and he did not get home at the specific time. I just went troppo and did a bit of thinking in those few hours. Of course, he came home drunk and I thought, "I am not going to live like this for the rest of my life. I am getting out now", so I told him I was leaving and I packed up and went back home.

I came from an alcoholic family where my father drank heavily. He thought the best time to argue was at one o'clock or two o'clock in the morning, waking all the family and neighbours with his yells and shouts. I used to take care of my younger sisters and brothers while this was going on and quieten them down. Then I would go in and have shots at my father and mother for carrying on like idiots. Eventually it would stop, but it went on constantly all the time. Whilst in prenatal, because all of us girls were in the same position we supported one another and were always there when somebody needed us. We had group meetings every week and we had our chores to do. We had outings and craft days. During this period we were examined by many doctors.

CHAIR: How many young women were there?

Mrs FORSHAW: There would have been about 12 to 20.

CHAIR: Coming and going?

Mrs FORSHAW: Coming and going all the time at different stages. We all slept in one room. No decorations or partitions - just a cupboard, bed and drawers. We had a little verandah, a radio, a television and record players. There was an outside room where we did a lot of stuff and we were allowed to use a kitchen that was nearby. We had everything that we needed in the kitchen to be taken care of and fed.

I thought that the treatment we received was acceptable. I did not find it hard or that bad that it made me bitter. A lot of the girls there were of different ages. I always remember waking up one night to a 14-year-old girl rolling herself off the bed all the time because she wanted to come into labour. Things like that would be very disturbing. When someone went into labour in the middle of the night we would all sit up chatting and offering support.

CHAIR: Were most of the other girls around your age?

Mrs FORSHAW: They started at about 14 and I think the oldest one was about 23, but most of them were around 18, 19, 20.

CHAIR: You talked about the friendship and the support. Did you discuss adoption or options with the other young women?

Mrs FORSHAW: They were horrified with me because at this stage I had already made up my mind that I was going to have my child adopted. They just thought that was not acceptable. I explained the reasons why and they had to accept it because that was my decision.

CHAIR: Were the majority of the other women planning to keep their babies?

Mrs FORSHAW: Everybody planned to keep them. Nobody wanted to give them away. At the end of the day, you never had too many choices.

CHAIR: Of the 12 to 20 young women you were with during that time, were all their babies adopted eventually?

Mrs FORSHAW: No, about two of them kept them. The one who was about 23 kept hers and I am sure there was another one along the way who kept hers as well.

CHAIR: You knew that because during that period they came back with their babies and then left with them?

Mrs FORSHAW: They left with their babies period. I think something must have happened right at the end that enabled them to keep their children. Maybe their boyfriend came back or their parents decided it was okay. Sometimes it can be used as emotional blackmail against a parent. You can hate your children but when you see the baby it is okay.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: At that stage of your life a few years makes a tremendous difference to your independence, from being 17, 18, 19 or 20 and being 21, 22 or 23?

Mrs FORSHAW: Of course. The girls of today are so much more aware than we were. We were very naive and immature and very dependent type of people. It was just totally different.

CHAIR: You said that most of the young women wanted to keep their babies and were shocked at your decision. What was the attitude of the social workers and other staff there? Did they discuss options with you? Did you feel they were pushing you in one direction?

Mrs FORSHAW: They did bring options into it but I had already thought of the options. Even though I was an immature person, my mind at that time in making a decision was very mature. I knew about fostering, home placements, adoption and keeping the child. The option to me was adoption because it was more stable and I wanted my child to have a stable environment, not have a foster person for 12 months, another person for 12 months and so forth. I thought it would have been better for the child to live in the same family environment knowing that was where he belonged instead of wondering where he belonged all his life.

CHAIR: Did you feel that the staff accepted that decision and thought it was right or were they neutral about your decision?

Mrs FORSHAW: They accepted the decision but they always used to ask me why I made it. They sort of reinforced everything that I was saying all the time.

CHAIR: Did you feel that they supported your decision?

Mrs FORSHAW: Of course they did.

CHAIR: I ask these questions because we have received different evidence about medical and nursing staff and social workers. Some women have given evidence that they felt under tremendous pressure from staff to make the decision to adopt.

Mrs FORSHAW: I am sure had I been in the same frame of mind as the other girls that I would have felt pressure because the general topic of the meetings was: How are you going to support your child when you leave here? Who is going to help you? How are you going to manage for money?

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Did the fact that you made the decision early to adopt the child help you to get on with your life? There was evidence from some mothers that they could not make up their mind and then for a long time after wondered whether they had made the right decision. Do you feel that acting rational and making up your mind early helped you to get on with your life?

Mrs FORSHAW: I believe that I was able to condition my mind. I talked my mind into it that this is what was going to happen. A lot of people did not have that time because they did not have the rationale that I had, I suppose. It did not hurt any less. But I think because I had really thought about it and because of the background that I came from there was no way that I was going to bring up a child in that type of environment. I was not able to live on my own, and I felt that he deserved better than that. I did not want to have to make the decision but I had to make one.

CHAIR: Did you have any contact with the child's father after you had left, as you described it?

Mrs FORSHAW: After I left him he used to write me letters begging me to go back to him and I would just say, "No, no, no."

CHAIR: Did he visit you?

Mrs FORSHAW: No. I told him I did not want to see him again, I did not want to hear from him, I did not want to know about him, and that is how I thought it would be. The day I was admitted to hospital with high blood pressure he happened to turn up with my aunt and he was very upset. I found out later that he had tried to kill himself because he realised he had nothing - he had no girlfriend, he had no baby, he had no-one - he was all alone. I saw him and told him what I was going to do and he was absolutely horrified. He wanted me to let him raise the child. A single father in those days was like, you know, you have to be joking.

He put a tremendous amount of pressure on me over a period of about four days. I just turned around one day and said, "You have got no job, which means you have got no money, and you have got no home. No way." He said, "But I will change, I will change." I said, "You have had time to change." He had had three months to change and he had not. So my decision stuck. I feel for him though because he was not allowed to have a say. It was not fair that he was not allowed to have a say, but that is the way it was at that time.

CHAIR: It sounds as if you were more mature than he was. You had thought through the situation and he had not thought about it quite so much.

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: Can you explain the treatment you received during the birth of your child and whether you considered that treatment to be unethical or unlawful?

Mrs FORSHAW: I did not find anything wrong with the treatment during the birth. My water broke when I was walking around and I was ushered to bed. The nurse was totally disgusted with me for being out of bed. I remember in the early hours of the morning I was wheeled to the labour room, where there were huge lights suspended from the ceiling. My legs were put into stirrups and a lot of pain began. Anything that we had been taught in our pre-mat lessons about breathing and giving birth was lost in space somewhere. I know I was absolutely petrified. I was terrified being in this great big sterile room on my own.

It got the better of me so much that as soon as the nurse walked out the door I would buzz her back. I would buzz her back sooner and sooner until she did not even make it to the door before I buzzed. She ended up telling me that she was going to make arrangements for a doctor. She tried to keep me calm. I knew I was being a nuisance but I could not help it. The doctor came in later and she said, "Roll over". In went the needle and there was no more pain. I ended up having an epidural. After that I was fine; I just went to sleep. I woke up with a pop, and the doctor peered down at me and said, "Look's like we're having a baby today." I thought how sensible a statement. I just said yes. He told me what he was doing, that he was doing a forceps delivery and stitches. When the baby was born I asked what sex it was. I asked if I could see him and they said no. They confirmed that he was for adoption and I said yes. I suppose when it was over I just got cleaned up and went back to the ward and cried.

CHAIR: When you say you asked if you could see him and they said no did you urge them to let you see him?

Mrs FORSHAW: No, I did not urge them because they turned around and said, "I think it's best if you don't see him. It will be harder on you." I agreed with that.

CHAIR: Had that been discussed in the home? Had it been understood that people believed it was better not to see the baby?

Mrs FORSHAW: It was discussed. It was explained that it probably would be better if we did not see the baby because if we saw the baby we want to hold the baby, and when we hold the baby it is much harder to give away. And it makes their job harder at the end of the day.

CHAIR: Do you think people accepted that view?

Mrs FORSHAW: No, not all the time. I think some people got very upset about it. I know a person who had been married and had an affair and had a child. She was told that she could not have a child; it was being adopted because she had no job and no home and her children were in a children's home. She was told that she could not see her baby. This was a grown woman. I know some people got treated roughly but I did think that it was harder to give a child away after you saw it.

CHAIR: Did you feel that your treatment during the birth was any different from that for other women, in particular married women or women who intended to keep their babies?

Mrs FORSHAW: I do not believe so. It was my first experience so I just took it as what it was. I remember when I had my second child I was exhausted and I told the doctor that I wanted an epidural. Even though epidural at that time, when I had my first child, was new and was heard to be dangerous I still got it done a second time.

CHAIR: Did you believe that you were being treated differently or in an inferior way in relation to everything else about the birth?

Mrs FORSHAW: No. There are always people who are very judgmental. There were sisters, nurses and a multitude of people who did not like you because you were unmarried and pregnant, let alone anything else. I found that it was very ego bashing but I tried not to let it worry me.

CHAIR: I suppose we know the answer to this question but you might want to say more because you have prepared some notes. How did you arrive at the decision to adopt your baby?

Mrs FORSHAW: One was the home life that I had. I knew I could not live on my own. I knew that I would need the support of my mother and father. I would have been living there. There were six children in a three-bedroom house; this would have been seven in a three-bedroom house, so it would have been very cramped. I was embarrassed with the situation I was in. I was just as embarrassed about the neighbours as what my mother was. I just could not do it. I could not bring up a child in that type of atmosphere. If I felt bad my feelings would go onto him. So the choice was made. There was nothing I knew of that the Government gave a single person with a child.

CHAIR: Did you hear about the possibility of receiving an allowance?

Mrs FORSHAW: This was 1969, and I do not think the sole pension came in until 1972.

CHAIR: That is right, but there was in fact an allowance, which was difficult to get.

Mrs FORSHAW: Even if it was an allowance it still would have been a tough existence because you still had to pay rent and buy food. You could not do that on your own; you still had to get a job. I thought that it would be too hard financially. I thought there was enough to worry about without financial difficulties as well as emotional difficulties and society's behaviour. I thought I had made the best decision. I remember even that divorcees had it pretty tough with their children. The benefits for them were not very good either.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: I do not wish to distress you, Mrs Forshaw. You have told us about how you reached that decision leading up to the birth, but there is a critical period for most mothers after the birth of the child when they must face up to these papers and sign a consent form. Can you tell us about that process? Were you fully appraised of the confirmation period that exists?

Mrs FORSHAW: I signed the adoption papers before I left the hospital. I did know that there was a four-week relief period. I do not know who told me; I just know that there was. My aunt may have told me but I would not really know. It was probably the most difficult part of the whole lot. Here I am conditioning my mind, saying that this is what is going to happen and I will be able to do it, but I did not want to do it. I just burst out in floods of tears. I remember there was at least one social worker - there could possibly have been two. They explained to me what was happening as far as the child was going to be adopted and it is for the best. They told me to sign on the line and when I have done that I can forget about it and get on with my life and not think about it again. It was pretty hard to do that.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: At any stage during the period up to the point of signing the papers and then the 28 days afterwards did you ever feel that you would reverse your earlier decision?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes I did. About two weeks later I could not stop thinking about the baby. My mother kept telling me not to be so silly and to get on with my life. I had been through this great trauma and it was not supposed to have happened; I just had to pretend it is not there. On one particular day I was so upset that I walked up the road, rang the hospital and asked if my baby was there. I thought if he was there I would go down and get him immediately. I do not know whether they told me the truth, whether he was there or not. I am not that pedantic that I will look back at my notes and nit-pick all these bits and pieces. I just believed what they said.

If he had not been there he would have already been prepared to go to another family. This family perhaps would be getting a new baby and they would have been happy. I thought that I could not go down there because these people were looking forward to getting this child and I would upset their world and make them unhappy. I wondered whether it was worth making two lots of people unhappy after I had made this decision for so many months that I could not just renege on it that easily. I do not know how I got home that day. I know I cried all day. My mother offered no sympathy at all. I just had to cope with it the best I could. When I did ring up they asked me if I wanted to see a social worker. I told them that I would think about it. I am not sure whether I did or not. I may have but it would have been only the once because I thought that talking about it was not forgetting about it.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Can you explain what impact that irrevocable decision had on you in the months and years afterwards?

Mrs FORSHAW: I changed. I was fairly outgoing before - a happy person. I withdrew. I did not know who I was because it seemed as though the old person was not worth knowing because she had to forget what happened beforehand. I started taking bits of people who I liked that I wanted to be and sort of made up somebody. I could not do enough for my mother. It did not matter what she wanted, when she wanted it and how she wanted it - she got it.

With my sisters I became very protective. When they became of a proper age that I decided was right I told them that I did not want to happen to them what happened to me. I told them if ever they had a problem to come to me, because you could not talk about it with my mother. She was never the same. Dad always blamed her 100 per cent because she never told me anything.

In those days sex education came in a packet of Modess, and that was about it, besides going to school and seeing a film once before you left. I did marry and had a couple of children.

With my children, I used to get them to sit down and watch all these soapy movies of people who had lost their child, maybe it was through death or fostering, and I would say, "That poor woman! How must she have felt?" I was always very emotional in romantic movies anyway, but if I cried it was okay. I did the same with their drug education. I would say, "This has happened because she went on to drugs." I was always honest with them. If they asked anything about sex I would always tell them something because I did not want the same thing to happen to them, but I did not let them know about what had happened to me. I still had friends from way back then that I could still talk to.

Some said, "Maybe you should think about finding him." I said, "No, I do not want to upset his life. I am too scared." I grew very untrustworthy; I could not trust anybody. At some stage I grew very indecisive. What I lost in some areas I gained in others, I suppose. You just cannot forget. It is something that you just cannot forget totally. I remember when I had my son I did not want him to be a boy, it is as simple as that. I did not want a son. I wanted another daughter. But he was a son, and it brought back everything to the son that I had given away. Years later I found out that they both weighed the same, they were both the same length and they both looked pretty identical; pretty similar.

The CHAIR: You said you did not want to try to find him, but you eventually had a reunion?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can you tell the Committee about the reunion and the involvement of the birth father?

Mrs FORSHAW: The birth father had married a birth mother and had a child. Because they had this common link they were always going to find their children. After 25 years he decided that the time was right. He knew that it was easier for me to access the information that he required, so he wrote me a letter and, over a period of about a month, telling him about the can of worms that he was opening, not realising the amount of uncertainty and hurt that was going to be involved, I decided to go along with it. I wish I could have said no, but the pain that he was carrying was just so deep that I had to be there for him because I was not there for him all those years ago. So we began a search.

It was very easy to find him. A lot of emotions were swirling around the place because the feelings I had for him were there as though it were only yesterday; it was like before we broke up. I had a whole lot of different things to combat. We found our son and he had had the sort of life that we had wanted him to have. Unfortunately, the reunion with the birth father did not go as well as expected because he was so anxious. He just wanted to go like a bull at a gate. As soon as he got something he wanted to take the next step and the next step. "I will be with you; it is okay." He just thought, "It is finally going to be over. It is going to be one happy little family. We are going to be able to spend time together." It was like he wanted to reclaim his son.

It did not matter how many times I told him that he now has a mother and a father, that he is not going to be considered a father. He found that pretty hard to take. I told him that all I could ever be was a friend, because I could not take away from him what he has already had that I had not been able to give him. I could not expect him to call me "mother". I just would not feel right. My reunion with him went pretty well because I involved his mother and my two children came with me, as he requested. We do not keep in contact very often now, but there has been so much going on in all our lives, as well as his, that I have needed the space and I felt that he did too. I send him birthday cards and Christmas cards and one of these days I will probably go up and see him again.

CHAIR: Was it in 1994 that the reunion took place?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: He was 25 then?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

CHAIR: You wrote in your submission that you made your decision to surrender your child knowing he would have a better chance in life than you could provide. Do you feel now that you made the right decision to have him adopted?

Mrs FORSHAW: I have to say yes because given the times then it was the only decision that I felt was right for him and for me.

CHAIR: Do you think, 30 years later, that has been proved to be the case?

Mrs FORSHAW: I could not have given him half the things that he received. He had two parents who loved him. He had a sister whom he lost. When his parents split he then had only two people looking after him. If one needed to go out the other one would look after him and so forth. He never had strangers look after him or friends and things like that. I believe that I made the right decision. I have to believe that. It is not a decision anybody wants to make, but sometimes you have to do things that you have to do. Sometimes you just have to follow your mind.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Perhaps your birth son shares the same feeling that it was a good decision because the adoptive

parents looked after him better?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Does your birth son feel similarly?

Mrs FORSHAW: He was thankful that he was not aborted. He said he was happy that we had given him life. The situation was always explained to him, that there was not any support and that some woman gave him up so that they could have a child. He said that he understood the way it was at that time and that he did not have any bad feelings about us because of what had happened. But I know that there were a lot of people that probably did not have quite so much of a good life when they were adopted, but it happens in families, too, not just adopted families. There is good and bad in everything.

CHAIR: What measures do you consider might assist mothers who are experiencing distress as a result of past adoption practices?

Mrs FORSHAW: I think some of them find it hard when it comes to a search when they were adopted interstate. It seems to take a long time to find anything out.

CHAIR: So that the search processes and help and so on need to be improved?

Mrs FORSHAW: Yes. There should be links between State and Federal governments so that searches within Births, Deaths and Marriages are a lot easier. I believe that is now being rectified. The only other thing I could suggest is for support from the Government for places like Past Adoption Resource Centre [PARC], Triangle and Jigsaw to be funded so that they can support the people who need the support now. There was not a lot of support back then, but if they need it now it should be easily accessed. I do not believe that we should get it all free. I do not think anything is free these days.

But I think that they have to accept what happened in the past, that they cannot change it, but it is not the same now. We were born at an earlier time when we could not keep our babies, and it was more judgmental and harder. They should try to look at it in a positive way instead of a negative way. And that is hard to do, because some people do not have a strong mind and that is where you get all your problems. Society has changed a lot since then. There was a big change, a revolution around our time, and there were a lot of demonstrations and a lot of people decided, "I want to be heard about this, this and this."

They would get up on their soapbox and eventually they were heard. It is only because of the past that the future can improve. Compensation: I do not think there should be any type of compensation. I do not believe that an apology that has been asked for is worth anything. I think you have to look inside yourself and I think you have to look to find the things that would make you happy instead of the things that make you unhappy.

(The witness withdrew)

BESSIE KNOX, Adoption Triangle, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: You have received a summons issued under my name?

Ms KNOX: Yes, I have.

CHAIR: You are conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

Ms KNOX: Yes, I am.

CHAIR: Do you wish your submission to be included as part of your sworn evidence?

Ms KNOX: Yes, I do.

CHAIR: Do you want to elaborate on your submission in any way, or shall we go straight into the questions that have been prepared? You can make a statement if you want to.

Ms KNOX: No, not at this stage. I would just read from my notes.

CHAIR: Could you describe the role and history of Adoption Triangle of New South Wales? In particular, could you comment on the number of members you have in New South Wales and the nature of the support provided?

Ms KNOX: Yes. Adoption Triangle New South Wales Incorporated was set up 1979 as a self-help and support group for adoptive persons, relinquishing parents and adoptive parents. The aims were to include the promotion of mutual understanding between all parties involved in the adoption process. Triangle's biggest task has always been providing support and guidance for people seeking to make contact with someone separated from them by adoption.

The organisation is not a tracing agency but is firmly committed to the principle of allowing its clients to do their own

searching in their own time as they feel ready to do so. Triangle also provides an intermediary service for those who do not feel they can make the first contact. Generally speaking, the organisation runs monthly meetings in major centres such as north Parramatta in Sydney, Newcastle which is our headquarters, Wagga Wagga, Tamworth, Lismore, Wollongong, Albury-Wodonga and Queanbeyan. Adoption Triangle is also represented on the New South Wales Committee on Adoption and Permanent Care.

Since the legislation changed in 1991, the organisation's focus has changed to be more counselling orientated as people seek to unravel the complexities involved in adoption. This can be both pre and post contact and may range from assisting to prepare for a first meeting or to help pick up the pieces if a contact does not work as anticipated. We now have an expanded role as telephone counsellors. Adoption Triangle finds that it is often, for some, the very first opportunity to talk about their adoption situation.

Since 1991, Triangle has seen a decline of financial members as those seeking our help, once having had their needs met, go on their way, never to be heard of again. Appreciative they are, but financial they are not. Financial membership has gone from the hundreds to less than one hundred. Membership is not a prerequisite to telephone counselling or attending a support meeting. The only exception is where mediation is requested. Most of those whom we telephone counsel we never meet. Many contact us by a referral from the department, the Post Adoption Resource Centre [PARC] and other adoption agencies, or sometimes through an information pamphlet.

CHAIR: Has your group collected any statistical data on the number of persons experiencing a negative impact from past adoption practices? In particular, could you comment on birth mothers and adoptees?

Ms KNOX: Official statistics have not been kept but every coordinator has heard stories, most of them from birth mothers, about the grief and anger they have carried with them for 30 or 40 years or more, including the anger at the uncaring treatment from those who should have known better and the unresolved grief that many were forced to bear alone because of the social attitudes of the day. For many adoptees, this is an added and unexpected burden to deal with when trying to build a relationship with a mother they have found. Many birth mothers were not allowed to see their babies. In some cases they did not know the sex of the child. Some were discouraged from naming their child. This caused pain and disappointment to adoptees when seeing their original birth certificate with no Christian name on the form. It sometimes takes quite a lot of convincing by the counsellor that this was not a reflection of the birth mother's feelings for her baby but quite often the result of some very bad advice: "Don't name the baby and it won't be real."

All our groups have listened to distressed birth mothers tell of incidents of having a pillow over their face during the birth and of the pills to quieten them and in some cases confuse and disorientate them. There were stories of not being told of their legal rights, intimidation and, in some cases, of being told that their baby had died when in fact it had not. I would like to quote from a birth mother about her experience. This is exactly as she wrote it:

Adoption was a cruel event and I personally wished it had never happened. You never get the child back and you suffer for the rest of your life. The pain never goes away and you are always wondering and wishing, "If only I could have kept my baby, things would be different now." It is such a stupid saying, "Go home. Forget you had this baby and get on with your life." You can't forget. It's there in your mind and it only takes a little thing like the birth of a child or a grandchild to bring it all back like a great big tidal wave coming in to scoop you up and it's all back again - the pregnancy, the labour, birth and the wondering where the baby went to."

It has been our experience, gained over many years, that this is truly representative of the emotional impact of giving up a baby for adoption. Whilst it is a matter of degree, it would be, from our experience, quite rare for a mother to then "get on with" her life.

Another case is the lady who phoned me and talked for the first time in 41 years of the daughter she gave up for adoption. During the one and a half hours we talked, she cried for much of that time. Her concern was that if she ever did find her daughter she, the birth mother, would not be worthy or educated enough for her daughter. She spoke of the kind solicitor who allowed her to do housework in his home before the birth and who arranged the adoption and told her not to worry about anything as her baby would go to a good family on the North Shore and she would be able then to get on with her life. He even visited her in hospital the day of the birth, had her sign some papers and gave her a box of Winning Post chocolates.

If you can, try to imagine the courage it took this lady to pick up the phone and speak to a stranger of the 41 years of grief she had been carrying. Her last words as she was hanging up were that she felt so much better for having spoken to me. I, however, was feeling rather depressed. We have spoken subsequently on this and she has had limited contact with her daughter but is mostly feeling better about herself since having lightened and shared her burden.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Part of the previous question was whether you had any statistical data. I think you described it in a more anecdotal way.

Ms KNOX: We have not any official statistics, no. I can just describe it broadly. Sometimes the phone will ring four or five times or more a day and then we might go several days without a phone call. Each of these calls will take at least half an hour and sometimes longer. This goes on in all our groups all over the State. We keep notes where we can but quite often people do not even want to give their names. They just want to talk or get some advice or some help. Quite often we don't get past the Christian name part. I like to give them choices. If they want to give their name, that's fine, or leave a telephone number. Sometimes they do want me to get back to them. I like to give them their choices about what they want to do.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: You made a statement that some mothers told you that the baby was born dead.

Ms KNOX: Yes.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Do we have any submissions about the same matter?

CHAIR: I do not think we do. We had one instance where a baby died some weeks later.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: It would be interesting if that was a complete lie.

Ms KNOX: One lady phoned me who was both distressed and delighted. She had received a call the day before from her son who was 38 years old - the son that she had been told had died. She never knew that he was still alive and, I guess, adopted. I guess that really did not happen - not legally, anyway. We talked about that - about how she was going to deal with that. She was torn between wanting to rush out and meet him and could not begin to think about him as a person because for 38 years she thought he was dead. She had been rethinking how they were going to have a reunion. He at least was sensitive enough, although I think it was such a shock for him, too. He had wondered why she had never come looking for him. That is at least one incident that I know of.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: That would be a practice that I think would be completely illegal.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: You mentioned in passing some of the practices which have caused the most concern, but I wonder if you can just focus on them now rather than just in the course of other comments. Can you tell us of practices that have come to your notice that have caused the greatest concern in the whole of this process?

Ms KNOX: In relation to the birth mothers that I have spoken to and those who have been in our group, I think it has been that they were not told of their choices and their legal rights, and just intimidation generally in not even seeing their babies. This has caused such enormous pain over the years, and whilst the reunion helps it does not really take that pain away. It has also been this having to "get on with your life". I think the lack of support that they got from family, social workers and legal people has been the biggest problem; it just seemed that they did not really exist. And they were treated very much like second-class people. I just think it was the general pain of the lack of support and help that was there for them.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: With regard to past adoption practices, are you able to refer to any specific instances which you would describe as unethical or in fact illegal?

Ms KNOX: Once again I can only go on the stories that I have been told; I have not any actual proof of it. Names were changed. "Smith" was a popular name that they were advised to use, and that way nobody would come looking for them. That often made it very difficult for adoptees in searching because when they looked for the name that they thought they were looking for, they found that there was no baby born on that day. Sometimes even the sex of the child was incorrect. We had one such situation in our organisation. There was no girl born to that lady on that day, however, there was a boy born to that lady on that day. So a boy was shown on the birth certificate when in fact it was not a boy, it was a girl.

I think that people who were giving this advice in those days possibly thought they had the best intentions in the world to help everybody, to help this young woman go away and forget that it ever happened and they said, "Nobody will ever come looking for you." Of course, in hindsight it was terribly wrong. This practice of not naming the child has caused a lot of pain, as I said, on both sides, and adoptees feel that they were not worthy of a name. That takes a bit of explaining to them, to not judge until you hear the story.

The word "real" comes up a lot in adoption, and it is a word that I dislike intensely. For example, it was said, "You are not their real child", or, "That is not your real mother", or "She is not your real mother and they are not your real parents", and so on. So adoptees grow up with this feeling that they are not real, and that is why most of them start this search. They need to find out that they are a real person because all their lives they had the label "adoptee", and they never lose that label.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: I wonder whether you would be able to assist the Secretariat in citing specific instances. If the Committee is to go beyond reporting this as anecdotal to actually making a finding that there were illegal practices such as the wrong names being recorded, falsification of documents, or whatever, we must have a little more direct evidence of it.

Ms KNOX: I am not sure that I can actually furnish that. I know that these things did happen, but-

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: I am not saying that it diminishes what you are saying. I do not need an answer now.

CHAIR: You may want to think about that. If there are cases such as that, the Committee can ensure that names are not used and things of that nature.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: You have referred to your own personal opinions about this practice of saying, "Forget about it and get on with your life." from your experience with relinquishing mothers, would you care to expand on what impact that has had on their lives subsequently?

Ms KNOX: For some, perhaps in the early days they did, to a certain extent, because that is what they were told to do. But sooner or later it came back that it was impossible. They thought about them every birthday, and so on. But the awful part was that usually there was no-one that they could talk to about it. Families in particular - who I feel have a great deal to answer for - do not

talk about it, so therefore it never happened. It is back to, "What would the neighbours say?", type of thing. If you did not talk about it, it did not exist and it never happened. Not being able to talk to anyone about it just added to the pain. It had to have been the worst advice in the world to give anybody: "You have had a baby, but get on with your life, it never happened, and everything is going to be fine", when in fact it was not.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What do your members, including birth mothers and adoptees, tell you about reunion?

Ms KNOX: One constant in reunions is that no two reunions are the same. Some are happy, some are sad, but most settle to the point of being comfortable. For most birth parents it is both a joy and a relief that their child is being loved and cared for. For most adoptees the reunion is a culmination of having an identity, to find someone that they are related to and belong to. This has nothing to do with whether the adoption has been good, bad or indifferent, but it is a need to find themselves, to have a background, to finally be real. It comes as a surprise to those who have been searching and finally make contact that reunion, far from being the ending, is really the beginning.

As counsellors we find the greatest difficulty in helping adoptees with reunions are those who have found out accidentally of their adoption, either by contact or by someone telling them, or, worse still, after the death of a parent. The anger and grief that this type of discovery brings is rather difficult to deal with. Some adoptees are in their sixties or seventies, which makes the task of reunion, or indeed even finding information, nigh on impossible. Whilst counselling helps, it cannot make up for the years of lies and secrecy. This must never be allowed to happen again.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What measures might assist persons experiencing distress due to past adoption practices? In particular, would you comment on reunions and counselling?

Ms KNOX: I guess that is where support groups come in a great deal. It is in this area that the support and counselling groups are able to help most. It is in this forum that people are able to talk openly about themselves and know that there is a true understanding of their feelings, not judgment, and, above all, that they feel safe. It seems that the need for support groups will go on for a long time.

I really do feel that this is an area where people can talk about their feelings. Adoption is all about feelings and emotion. Trying to explain your feelings to someone who is not involved in it, whatever side of the triangle they are on, it is impossible for them to understand how you are feeling without you starting to sound like you are obsessive or going a little out of your mind. That is how they feel. It is a relief when they can sit in a group where people nod their heads and say, "Yes, I know how you feel." They know that you know how they feel, and that is huge.

This is where telephone counselling comes in. When someone starts talking and telling you the story, and you say, "Yes, I know how you feel", and they say, "Oh, it is so good to talk to somebody who knows how I feel, instead of someone saying, 'Yes, I know how you feel, because the book says this is how you are supposed to feel'.", in fact all they are wanting to do is to say, "No, you don't know how I feel because you have not walked in my shoes." As far as I and my organisation are concerned, support groups are the way to go.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: For practical reasons many of the Committee's submissions have come from people whose experiences have been in Sydney. To a limited extent the committee has heard from people who have had experiences in Newcastle and surrounding areas. You have made mention of some regional centres. The Committee would be delighted to hear further about the experiences in country centres.

Ms KNOX: They run similar types of things. I guess in country areas support groups are even more important. In country towns, it is very difficult to talk to somebody without everybody knowing everybody else's business. That is why in country towns support groups are able to help quite a lot and people can feel even safer there. Support groups have been going on for quite a long time in country areas. I cannot talk a great deal about what the experiences have been, because their numbers seem to keep rolling in. Every time there have been changes or publicity about adoption, it seems to swell their numbers. But they do fill a very important role in country areas, because it is very difficult in a small country town to be able to talk to anyone. When they have their own groups they feel a whole lot safer.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: I recall that when the Law Reform Commission conducted its review of the Adoption Information Act and held inquiries in various rural settings, including Dubbo, the commission found it difficult to get people who were involved to come along and speak to the inquiry. They felt that in country areas everybody knows everybody, and even though they were go to Dubbo for that inquiry they were very reluctant to do so.

Ms KNOX: Yes. This is why they have coffee mornings or evenings in their homes. Yes, getting them to come to an open forum, particularly then, when that was all happening, was very difficult. I am representative on the New South Wales committee, as I said, and we run community education seminars both in Sydney and country areas. Whenever we advertise in country areas we are overwhelmed by the number of people who come to those seminars. There is a hunger, if you like, out there for information, understanding and a chance to talk to others who are involved in adoption. So it is freeing up as far as people's attitudes are concerned.

We had a very large seminar in Queanbeyan and we were quite overwhelmed by the number of people who came, from both Canberra and surrounding areas. I think that is getting better as people's attitudes change. Certainly in the lead-up to the changes in the legislation it was difficult to get people to come and talk.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: One of the things that we are all conscious of is that there was a particularly relevant period and that gradually time is moving on and people's attitudes, anxieties and fears, inhibitions, and so on, are being modified by the passage of time. I am sure that you would be observing that, in the change in the nature and rate of inquiries that you are having.

Ms KNOX: Yes. I think that the shame, if you like, that everybody was feeling - including adoptees, because they were made to feel that by the attitudes of the day - is lifting. People are realising that they can talk openly about these things and that they will not be judged as harshly as they used to be. And some of the terrible things that they thought might happen with the legislation changes did not really happen that badly or happen like that. So I think people's fears generally have abated and they are feeling a lot more comfortable these days.

CHAIR: Most of the evidence the Committee has heard suggests that girls from the country come to Sydney to give birth - for all those reasons that you have just been talking about, that is, the feelings of shame, and so on. Are you aware of any cases in which there a birth and an adoption occurred in the same geographical region - not necessarily somewhere as large as Dubbo, but perhaps smaller centres?

Ms KNOX: Yes, this did happen quite often with the aid of the church. We found some cases in which the grandmother, I guess - the mother of the girl who was going to give birth - in horror would immediately go, usually to the parish priest, and he in turn would then invariably know someone who needed a child. She was still sent to the city to have the baby. But it did happen in some of the country towns.

CHAIR: But the baby would then go back to the same town?

Ms KNOX: Yes, to the country area. This did happen quite a bit, and it happened in the city areas quite a bit. Usually with the church involvement they would immediately go for help and ask, "What am I going to do?" It was a case of, "Leave it to me. I know somebody who wants a baby." So it would be organised, if you like. But this did happen. Obviously, this made it very difficult.

CHAIR: Because quite a few people would know but the girl involved would not know?

Ms KNOX: Yes. As I said, there are a lot of grandparents out there who have a great deal to answer for as far as I am concerned in relation to their eagerness to push it all under the carpet and this sort of thing. They often instigated where there were no choices for the girl involved. It was a case of, "Yes, you can come back home but the baby will not. So just come home and we will forget all about it."

CHAIR: Do you think that an apology made by the relevant government agencies and private adoption agencies would assist people who have been affected by past adoption practices?

Ms KNOX: We believe that for some an apology would at least be an acknowledgment that what happened to them was wrong. In some ways this would help. But for most it could never take away the pain and the memories, no matter how many sorries are said. It certainly would help but it would not fix the whole thing. I think, frankly, it is the least that could be done.

(The witness withdrew)

At the request of the witness, the name of the witness has been withheld. This witness will be known as WITNESS G.

WITNESS G, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand?

WITNESS G: Yes, I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

WITNESS G: Yes.

CHAIR: I believe you do not have a written submission. We have sent questions to you. Do you want to say something first or shall we just go to the questions?

WITNESS G: No, that will be fine.

CHAIR: Can you tell the Committee about the circumstances surrounding the confirmation of your pregnancy? For instance, how old were you, how did you feel about it and who did you discuss the situation with?

WITNESS G: I was 20 years old. I was scared about finding out I was pregnant. I did not know what to do or where to go. I discussed the situation with a few friends. All their comments were to keep the child and live as best I could with my parents help and the government's help and things like that.

CHAIR: What year are we talking about?

WITNESS G: It was 1992. I was glad I was pregnant but I was not ready to be a mother so I had to look at the options I had. When I found out, I was 5 ½ months pregnant so I lost my choices about being able to terminate. I really only had to keep the baby or to find an alternative for my child. I am sorry -

CHAIR: Do you want to say anything more about that?

WITNESS G: No.

CHAIR: The second question goes straight on from that. At what point did you come to the decision to have your baby adopted and what factors contributed to the decision? You have said a little about that already.

WITNESS G: Not being able to have a termination, I was left with limited choices. I had only heard about adoption and had not learnt anything about adoption. I suppose that it was about two weeks after I found out that I was pregnant that I chose adoption, still not knowing what that meant until I went to speak to someone at the agency to ask, "What is adoption and what are my options?" To me, it was still a fully closed adoption where the baby was taken away and you never saw it and that was it and you got on with the rest of your life. That is not what I was told. I was told about a fully open adoption, being able to have contact in letters. So it made my decision a lot easier about what I did. I could not keep him financially so gave him up for adoption.

CHAIR: At what point did you go to the adoption agency? How pregnant were you?

WITNESS G: I was about six months pregnant. I was very ready right then and there to sign the papers and say, "Okay, once this baby is born you can have him - not a hassle." I was told, "Slow down. You have to wait a few days until after he is born." They gave me information about what happens and how it all goes. There was counselling to help me get through it. I am lost for words.

CHAIR: So you found the information and counselling sufficient for what you needed?

WITNESS G: At the time it was, yes. Looking back now it was probably not. It was very basic, "This is what is going to happen and you will go through these grieving periods and we will be there to help you certain parts of the way. You will just get on with your life and your child will get on with its family and its life. You will have contact and it will just go through the agency and that is how it will go."

CHAIR: Do you believe that the treatment you received before, during or after the birth of your child was unethical or illegal?

WITNESS G: No, not at all. Everyone told me exactly what was going to happen. I had the chance to stay in hospital with my child once he was born. You can do basically what you would do if you were not putting your child up for adoption. So there was nothing unethical or illegal about anything.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Can you tell us about your recollections of the signing of the papers, the consent form? For instance, who was present at the signing? Did you receive counselling at that time? Precisely what time after the birth of the child did you address those consent forms?

WITNESS G: I signed six days after he was born. He was still in the hospital. I was with my counsellor at the time, who signed the consent forms. She read through them with me and I read them myself. I understood all the consequences of what I was doing. I could revoke my consent at any time up until the 30 days were over. It was just clear English about what I was doing, making sure I understood it and helping me through the emotional time I was actually sitting there and signing the rights of my child away to someone else.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: And you felt comfortable with the support you had with the counsellor that you trusted being present?

WITNESS G: Yes.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Moving on from that short-term perspective, what in your opinion have been the long-term consequences to you?

WITNESS G: The long-term is too hard to say. I am only seven years into where I am. Long term for me is 20 years down the track. With the open adoption that I have there are not major consequences because each day we take it and it is just who asks what questions. It is too early to say what the long-term consequences will be, if any.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Are you still satisfied that you made the right decision for yourself and also for your child?

WITNESS G: Definitely. To see him happy and in a loving family and being loved by two people who all they ever wanted was a child. I would not be where I am today if I had not done what I did. So I am really happy.

CHAIR: And for yourself?

WITNESS G: Yes. My career would not be where it is if I had not done what I did. I was not ready to be a mother. As much as I love children, I just was not ready financially or mentally to be a mother. I had seen a lot of my girlfriends go through pregnancies and keeping their children and not being able to survive, not being able to put food on the table for their children. I did not want that. I did not want to live off the Government and not be able to give my child everything that I had had growing up as a child. It definitely was the right decision.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What contact did you have with your son in the weeks and months after the birth?

WITNESS G: I had contact with him about three or four days before he went to his adoptive parents. I had about four hours of sitting with him and being able to say my goodbyes to him. At first I did not want any contact because I was grieving and it was too hard. I was notified about two months after he had gone to his family that there was a letter from them and photos. I took them not knowing whether I would answer them back, but to read and find out that he had a loving family made me realise that I needed contact. When he was six months old I saw him and except for 18 months where I did not have any contact, it has been either once a year or every six months that I see him and letters go back and forth between that time.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Do you have any contact with your child? If so, could you explain how the contact came about and what you hope for in the future?

WITNESS G: As I said, I have contact all the time now. It is still closed and it still goes back and forth through the agency. For the future, I would hope that it will one day change and it will be more open, with knowledge of more identifying information, and that it will be more relaxed and family orientated but that is purely up to them. That is not my choice.

CHAIR: Can you tell the Committee a little bit about the system? If you feel distress and need to make contact, what restrictions are there and to what extent can the agency, acting as an intermediary, intervene for one side or the other?

WITNESS G: When I have had feelings that something is wrong or I just needed to know if he was okay, I have just rung the agency and they have rung up and usually within 24 to 48 hours, if not a couple of hours, I know that he is okay, that everything is all right and that there is not a problem. Finding out the information is not a problem. They are quite willing to give the information and help me through it because it helps them understand where I am at as well.

With the letters, I will write a letter, it goes to the agency and then they pass it on and vice versa and nothing is censored. In the beginning there were a few times where my councillor rang me and said, "Do you really want to say this. It is not time to say this now. We should hold off". However, it was still left to me as to whether that letter got sent on, asking questions and then asking questions of me. It has all been mediated and looked at and it has helped both of us to get to where we are at today.

CHAIR: Do you know anything about the attitude of the adoptive parents as to whether they would say these same sorts of things about the mediation being worthwhile?

WITNESS G: Yes, they are quite happy. They know it has helped them to be where they are and it has helped my child in knowing that he is adopted and is coping quite well with it. It means that if they have medical questions they can come back and ask me or the councillor and she can ring me and say, "He has got this medical problem. Has anyone in your family suffered that?", which happened recently when he had problems. I was able to give them the family history, which was able to help identify some of his problem.

CHAIR: What measures do you consider might assist people who are experiencing distress as a result of past adoption practices or, in your case, with ongoing adoption practices?

WITNESS G: Being able to have contact with other birth mothers and people going through similar situations. There are groups that can get together but a lot of the time for those of us who work full time weekends are our time and there is not a lot we can do to see people. A lot of them are very structured and it would be better for people to be together in a more relaxed situation. Also, I would have like to have had someone to talk to when I was actually pregnant and said, "You have done this; what are your feelings?" But because of the Privacy Act we cannot do that. I would now like to help other people but I still cannot do that. Knowing and being able to say to someone, "I'm feeling this. Have you felt this before?" would be a great help. I am lucky now that I have some friends who were going through the same thing and we can talk about it, but there is not a lot of that out there. It is very closed in that sense and there needs to be more education of the children of what is going on.

(The witness withdrew)

At the request of the witness, the name of the witness has been withheld. This witness will be known as WITNESS H.

WITNESS H sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

WITNESS H: I am appearing as a relinquishing mother.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons issued under my hand in accordance with the Parliamentary Evidence Act 1901?

WITNESS H: Yes.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of this inquiry?

WITNESS H: Yes.

CHAIR: You have not made a submission. Do you want to make a statement or shall we go straight to questions?

WITNESS H: I have actually written my response and if it is okay with the Committee I would like to read this and if there are further questions members could interrupt me. I have given quite a bit of detail about my family situation at the time of my pregnancy. I do not know how relevant it is but I personally felt it was relevant in my decision, so if it gets boring, could you please interrupt me?

CHAIR: You are aware that if you read everything you have written it will appear in the transcript?

WITNESS H: Yes.

CHAIR: So if you want to exclude details because they might identify someone make sure you do not mention them.

WITNESS H: That is fine. I am aware of that.

CHAIR: Do you want to read through everything you have written or answer questions?

WITNESS H: I have done it in question and answer form.

CHAIR: You would prefer to read it through?

WITNESS H: I would like members of the Committee to ask questions, which I will answer, but questions two and three go together.

CHAIR: Because it is often easier if you say something for us to ask a follow-up question at the time.

WITNESS H: Yes.

CHAIR: Could you please tell the Committee about the circumstances surrounding the confirmation of your pregnancy, for instance, how old were you, how did you feel about the pregnancy and with whom did you discuss the situation?

WITNESS H: In 1983 I was 17 years old and I discovered that I was pregnant. I had known of this fact deep in my heart for quite some time but refused to admit it. I denied that it could happen to me and growing up in a strongly Catholic household discussion about birth control was limited to the context of marriage. I am the youngest of five children, and my brothers and sisters had already left the nest and were making their new lives, building successful careers and relationships. I am a late-in-life baby and the youngest by eight years. By this stage mum and dad were focused on building a house and preparing for their retirement or reliving the halcyon days of their earlier lives when the others were little.

They were children of the Depression and my father served in World War II. My brothers and sisters were wonderful to me and had lived through and lived out many of the changes to society whilst starting at university in the 1970s and living in countercultural environments. They represented a new morality and I aspired to be as I had seen them in their teenage years, rejecting the taboos so evident in my parents' attitudes. Going to a single-sex school meant that I idolised boys and looked for close companionships through sexual relationships with which I was not really equipped to deal.

Whilst mum and dad were good parents to us in most ways the whole family was in a state of flux at the time, even before I dropped the bombshell of my pregnancy. My older brothers and two sisters were married, the second sister only a couple of months before. The first sister had two children, had just sold her business and both sisters were to announce their pregnancies not long after me. The youngest brother had moved out but was struggling with study and still needed mum and dad's support and, as I said earlier, mum and dad were adjusting to these changes.

I would stay down the South Coast with my sister during my holidays and help out in the business. There I would break out, away from the perceived shackles of my parents' control. A visit from my boyfriend down the South Coast led me to confront my changing body and to go to a general practitioner, who confirmed that I was pregnant. He gave me an examination but really did not discuss any options with me. He just asked me what I hoped to do in terms of my career choice and recommended I tell my parents. I was about 13 weeks pregnant. My boyfriend left in search of work up on the North Coast. I did not want him around when I broke the news.

The strict and sometimes volatile regime imposed by my dad meant the news of my pregnancy reached earth-shattering proportions. My sister flew down from Dubbo to help me break the news and she had already told mum on the phone for me. I can still remember sitting in my room looking out the window as my sister and brother broke the news to him in the back yard and feeling sick with shame and regret. I knew that he would see me as a fallen woman. However, I was not fully prepared for his response. He asked me to have an abortion. At that stage I must have been 14 weeks pregnant and I was horrified at this, considering his faith. It was antithetical to everything he had stood for.

I think he was partly motivated by wanting to spare me trauma; to be rid of a nuisance and protected from what he would see as public humiliation was how I described his motivation. Reputation had always been very important to him. He took me to a Macquarie Street specialist, who said that he could do an operation. In my emotional state I perceived the luxuriousness of the doctor's waiting-room as the proceeds of blood money and decided that he was a criminal. From then on my resolve hardened. I would not commit murder. My mother was supportive of this decision and it was never mentioned again. This leads me to the next question.

CHAIR: Tell the Committee at what point you came to the decision to have the baby adopted, what factors contributed to that, what information you received on alternatives, and the desires you expressed about keeping the baby?

WITNESS H: The factors which led me to consider adoption were the alternatives put to me by my family and a sense of betrayal and rebellion which began as the family discussed my options, both between each other and with me. Everyone kept telling me it was my decision and all the advice I received at the time came from everyone with a vested interest, a paternal interest or an ideological position in general. Everyone felt they were doing the right thing in the discussions. The different family members' reactions would have a deep impact on me during this time.

My previously close and idolised brother presented life as an unmarried mother as the role of a pariah on the family and on society. He harangued me with stories about his excursions to nightclubs full of unmarried mothers wanting to snare a father for their child. My parents and brother implied that unmarried mothers lacked education, were dependent on meagre social security handouts and were often in violent and abusive relationships. I was told that by keeping my baby I would seriously restrict my chances of meeting a worthwhile and loving partner. I would also restrict my baby's chances by keeping her. I could not possibly provide the comfortable North Shore existence that I had known. Even though our family was not lavish with money, we lived in a nice area and could always have family holidays. Could I reach the same ideal? I could not.

Apart from that I knew no single mothers who did not fit the stereotype. There were no role models to go to in this area. All my family were in relatively secure monogamous relationships and were following the path of the nuclear family. Skeletons also began to come out of the family closet. My childless sister-in-law confided to me that she had previously had an abortion but had not seemingly regretted the decision. Another confided that she had had one but had regretted and suffered terribly for it.

In my naivete these confidences had the effect of shocking and disgusting me, as I had already begun to feel a spiritual attachment to the child. Adoption then was becoming a middle road which would suit my new-found feelings about the sanctity of life. It may somehow allow me to re-establish my parents', especially my father's pride in me as the favoured baby of the family and undo the deep shame and disappointment that I had caused them. It would be both a penance and a rebellion against murder.

Compounding my position was a feeling of responsibility for causing problems in my parents' relationship. Mum begun to feel attached to the idea of having another baby in the family, even though my sisters had announced their pregnancies by this stage. She said that I could live at home and offered support, even though I knew my father felt he had done his bit in the child-rearing area. The tension was palpable. To preserve their relationship I began to lean towards adoption as well.

The thought of continuing a claustrophobic life of dependence on my parents was sickening and I knew that I would have to be eternally grateful for their support, as in the past we were all imbued with a conscience of gratitude for the opportunities which my parents had given us. I held that great fear of dependence, forever emotionally indebted and having to feel grateful for the magnanimous sacrifice in helping me to bring up a child. This could possibly have been used as emotional blackmail upon me later if I had chosen to keep my baby. As well, mum would have grown very attached to the babe and would have brought the child up as her own, perhaps repeating some of the mistakes I felt had been made in our inability to really communicate through my teenage years. It was impressed upon me by family members in general discussion that mum and dad would not have the energy or desire to bring up a child.

I also began to have serious doubts about my own ability to be a good mother. I had seen my sister with her children and knew that the hours were long and that the loving support of a partner made the job easier. Could I measure up? Could I be a loving mum, as patient as my sister and as loving our own mum? It was pointed out to me that my life experience was limited and that I may resent the child for my own lack of opportunity. I doubted in myself that I could be the best mum possible, and so I lent more towards adoption.

The joy of raising a child, the thrill of watching their progress, the loving touch of little hands and the sharing of wonderful times together where everything is new again, where you look at the world through the eyes of your child, which I have experienced in having my own children, was not really emphasised. I have already spoken about my parents' reaction, but regardless of any decision they made, they stressed how important it was that I continue my education. I left school in May when I was about 20 weeks pregnant. I kept my pregnancy secret, except for telling two friends. Leaving school was somewhat of an anti-climax.

There had always been the expectation that I would attend university, just as my brothers and sisters had. I was told that bringing up a child would seriously hamper my opportunities to study and have a career. I began to consider what I would do with my life and I began to think about teaching. I had not liked the impersonal nature of my high schooling and felt that I could make a difference. So I guess I buried myself in study or dreaming over books, as this was an escape from the pressures that were mounting.

The last of the issues I have really only allowed myself to confront in recent years. My daughter's paternity was in doubt. In my mind not only had I been promiscuous but I felt sick at the thought that I would have to one day face my daughter with this fact. Because I believed I held deep feelings for these boys - I was at the end of one relationship and wanted to begin another - I put myself in a position where I was unable to cope. Without wisdom and experience I did not fully understand the meaning of a true relationship. I drove all this home to myself and hated that position, and thought perhaps I did not really deserve my baby anyway and that it was all too difficult to face.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Did you attend an unmarried mothers' home during your pregnancy? If so, would you briefly explain that experience? If not, where did you live throughout your pregnancy and what support did you receive?

WITNESS H: I did not attend an unmarried mothers' home during my pregnancy. It was not considered an option. I continued to study by correspondence at home towards my Higher School Certificate. Mum and dad sent me to my sister's property in the Central West for the school holidays, but later I joined my older sister who was between businesses on the Far South Coast. We were staying at my parents' mostly completed retirement house. I returned to Sydney after a couple of months when dad went down to finish working on it. I felt better to be away from dad because he was ashamed of me and could barely look at me. I received sickness benefits for a few months. I had strong support from my sister and I enjoyed living there. I had help with my work.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: As the fifth question is irrelevant, I will ask the sixth question. What do you recall about signing the adoption consent form? For example, who was present at the signing, did you receive counselling and what date after the birth did you sign?

WITNESS H: I visited a Catholic adoption agency a few times before signing. I do not remember how many times, it is a bit of a blur. I liked the social worker, but she emphasised that she was there for the child and was concerned to do the right thing by the child. She stressed that we should expedite the signing of the consent as the baby needed to bond with the mother quickly. I was left with the impression that if I did not hurry and make a decision I would be doing psychological damage to my child.

We discussed possible options, such as foster care, but the social worker warned me of the dangers and pitfalls. I was left with the impression that foster care would be dangerous and unsettling for my daughter. I was not sure whether or not it was the social worker's intention to lead me to believe this or whether that was just the stereotypes I believed in at the time. However, no firm information was given about such care as an option. I received no information about financial assistance to single mothers or about other support mechanisms that were in place in 1993. I could have visited the social security office myself, but I was relatively disempowered by this stage.

I signed the consent one month after the baby was born because she was premature and stayed in the hospital. The social worker wrote on my file that I was controlled at signing and asked to see the baby in hospital. She wrote that she felt I was still a very long way off coming to terms with either option. They had a family picked out for her who already had one adopted son and were very comfortably off. It was pointed out to me that I was lucky because adoption was no longer as it had been in the past. I could have contact by letter and I could also meet her new parents if I agreed to it. All that was dependent upon the parents, too, of course.

Letters would be sent to the Catholic adoption agency, read by the social worker, any revealing information taken out and then rewritten. The pressure was mounting, so I signed the document. I came into town on my own and went through the document very carefully with the social worker. She read it, pausing for clarification and asking if I understood. I signed.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: I will return to question No. 5. My colleague the Hon. H. S. Tsang suggested that it had perhaps been answered in another way. Would you assure us that you felt the whole process during your treatment before the birth, the delivery of the child and the process of consent was, firstly, ethical and, secondly, at no time what you would regard as legal constraints were breached?

WITNESS H: I guess there are grey areas. I have told the story as it is. I would have to leave that decision to somebody else because I was really in the midst of it. I thought at the time that I was well treated. I had been admitted to hospital a few weeks before the birth and kept there for a week as I had some bleeding. I was given pethidine to stop the labour and kept in hospital. I thought the food was great - I must have been mad. I was put in a room with a lady who was having a miscarriage quite late in her pregnancy. I had my own doctor. I was supposed to sit for my trial HSC at that stage, but that was postponed until after my release from hospital.

After a couple of weeks I went into premature labour again and was admitted to hospital. I was given Valium to stop the labour but it did not work. I had attended prenatal classes and had talked to people, so I knew what to expect in terms of the birth. At about 5.00 a.m. the doctor and my mother came. I held the baby after she was born but not for very long because she was premature. They took her and placed her in a humidicrib in the nursery. The hospital staff suggested that I not breastfeed the baby

as I would bond with her and it would make the decision about adoption too hard for me. They gave me a packet of tablets to prevent lactation. I administered one or two to myself and then only spasmodically as I was still ambivalent. I gave my daughter a name and she stayed at the hospital. I would go to visit her every day, giving her a bath and, quite often, a bottle if it was feeding time.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Moving away from the immediate months and year you have been talking about, what have been the long-term consequences of adoption for you? Were you provided with information and counselling on the possible long-term consequences or given any help during those latter times?

WITNESS H: The social worker at the Catholic adoption agency told me that I would go through a grieving process. She compared it to having a death in the family. I had never experienced this, so I just accepted it. It was quite a poor analogy, as it did not truly describe the self-condemnation, the feeling that I sometimes live in an alternative reality made whole by the baby I gave away. The analogy could not describe the feeling of loss, especially around her birthday.

I wonder about her every day. Even though I get letters from her mother and from her, they cannot replace the closeness. I did see a counsellor at Centacare who was not involved in Catholic adoptions. She was very good and encouraged me to elaborate on issues and confront particular things that were worrying me at the time. However, I think by that stage it was after the birth and it was really quite late. She advised me that I should try to stall the signing of the consent, but by this stage I had had enough. I think long-term effects, other than those I have described, are that I am constantly revisiting the past - although I am not totally debilitated by it, more I have a feeling of grief and long-term loss.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: As you are so well prepared I will stay with the order of the questions. This is a very subjective question, and you will answer it in the way you choose. In retrospect, do you feel that you did the right thing for yourself and your baby?

WITNESS H: I tend to judge the person I was in the past from today's standpoint. At that time I had a sense of moral righteousness, which can be different from doing the right thing for yourself. I had stuck with the pregnancy against pressure to do otherwise. That gave me some strength. I comforted myself with the idea that the baby would go to a happy family who loved her. I guess that circumstances since have redeemed the decision. After the adoption I moved away from home and went to university, met my loving husband and a great group of friends with whom I felt accepted. I did well at university and made my parents proud of me again. I have two beautiful children.

Overall, the adoption process has made me a stronger person. Hopefully it has made me more tolerant and accepting of others and given me a stronger capacity to love. It has made me more intolerant of hypocrisy and pretension. In some ways I think that other crises in my life are insignificant compared to facing adoption. In making future decisions I have not tried to discount an emotional element in weighing up factors towards a conclusion. Decisions need to be made practically and with factual knowledge but it can be dangerous to discount where your heart leads you and where your attachment lies. Too often we are calculating in judgments because those intangible aspects cannot be measured.

I find it difficult to talk about my adoption experience. That is why I am reading this. It is not easy to share those feelings or your past history with anybody. If I do tell others about my experience I feel as though I am seeking some kind of exoneration. I do not feel blame towards anyone and I do not think I feel bitter. As to whether or not I did the right thing by my child, in the long term only she can be the judge of that. From her letters she is happy and her parents have always been honest with her about her adoption. They feel free to talk to me and she has grown up with me.

My biggest worry is the idea of a contribution of genetic heritage in her personal development. Who you look like and take after can help forge your own understanding of yourself. I am not just talking about idiosyncratic personality traits, such as the way one walks. How we cope with tendencies in our personalities which can be destructive or qualities which can be harnessed for our advantage can be learned by looking at relatives with similar characteristics.

Of course this touches upon the nature versus nurture debate, when one wonders how much of who we are is genetically programmed or environmentally determined. It is difficult to tell. However, by having my child adopted I worry that it may cause problems for her in the future in that there will be that genetic understanding missing. I do not feel blame but I miss my daughter and I wonder about her. I would not do it again now but for the person I was at the time, given exactly the same circumstances, I possibly would. Did I do the right thing? Yes and no.

CHAIR: That leads into the next question. Do you have any contact with your child now? If so, can you explain how that came about? If not, do you feel the need to establish contact?

WITNESS H: In the early days I had contact via letter about once or twice a year. The letters were accompanied by photos and the first few were written by the same social worker who had been present at consent. The letters were written in the third person. After a couple of years the letters were photocopies of the originals and the revealing information would be crossed out. This information was merely specific place names which would reveal the family's whereabouts, even though I knew capital cities, et cetera. Sometimes I would receive a card or drawing from her.

Another letter I received included photographs of her standing outside the hospital where she was born. I then replied by telling the story of her birth so that she could imagine the place as well. If I knew what specific needs she had and what information she needed I could respond by letter, but it is difficult to predict what she wants to know unsolicited. Most recently I have had a

letter from my daughter telling me about her life. I enjoy receiving any news, although I know it is probably out of a sense of duty. I would hate to feel that she felt compelled to write.

I have not written many letters and for three or four years I sent nothing. I find it incredibly hard to post the letters even though I have written many. Some of those I have written have been too sad, others too self-indulgent or too intellectual. I find it so hard to write for an audience with whom I am so emotionally bound but who are also strangers. Then the guilt issues surfaces and I write heavy poetry which is overdone. There would have been 100 incomplete letters thrown in the bin and as many rejected complete ones. I have not been a good correspondent. Recently I wrote a long letter talking about my decision to adopt but I do not know if she is emotionally ready to deal with this. I have left it with her parents to make a decision about the timing of this letter.

I have a horrible fascination with reunion. There are no social rules for meeting a relative stranger who feels a part of you. There is no script to follow. Even questions about where we would meet trouble me. Would she judge me? Would she hug me? Would I know how to start a conversation with her? I am dying to meet her but she may not want to meet me. I feel I should wait until she is ready to meet me, but what if she never wants to. Could I live with that? What if she knows enough about me to satisfy her curiosity and does not need a birth mother? What will I have to offer her? What role can I have in her life? What if she hates me for having her adopted?

I do not know if she will ever understand as she will never be in exactly the same circumstances as I was when I fell pregnant with her. Can she understand a mother's attachment to her child? Perhaps it would be better to wait until she has her own baby; she may want to meet me then. I fantasise about these reunion scenarios from time to time. My children are only two and four. My husband has talked to them about Jessica a few times but it does not sink in. I have tried but I fear they will think that I will give them away too. My poor husband always has to do the hard bits. I would like to establish more contact in the future but I would also like to be properly prepared for it.

CHAIR: What measures do you consider might assist people experiencing distress as a result of past adoption practices?

WITNESS H: Study into the long-term effects of adoption on all parties involved would be useful. Because reunion issues are important to me, that is an area I would like further help with, and I would recommend that for others. Perhaps counselling for all parties involved, including adoptive parents, would be beneficial. Some of the information I have read about reunions has been overly prescriptive or based on out-of-date information. Trained professionals should be available to people who are uncertain about approaching their children or birth parents. It would be one of the most difficult things to do to ring up your child and suddenly announce who you are.

We are looking at a different generation of adoption from about the 1980s onwards. Some needs will be similar but others will be different as social attitudes have changed. Any councillor or professional dealing with this area would need to be across these issues. Studies should be conducted and funding allocated to this. As a group, birth mothers have been marginalised in the adoption process. They have not been able to share their feelings due to community perceptions and media representation of adoption issues. Relinquishing mothers have been demonised and judged as callous for giving their children away but it has never been that simple. The typical media story depicts a scarred adopted child damaged through ever feeling the black sheep of an adopted family with whom he or she felt nothing in common and was perhaps even neglected.

The story will then present the relinquishing mother as the baddie who has inflicted a life of pain on her child because she did not really want him or her. Perhaps members of the media present will take this on board and demonise the society from which those mothers came and not the people who were victims of social circumstance. The reaction against adoption has now seen it pilloried as an option. I think people need to make their own choices. Knowing more about its dangers and outcomes would be beneficial to all parties involved. I do not think it should be banned; I think we should have more information.

People need to be able to make informed choices and receive information from people who are not emotionally involved. Every attempt should be made to keep families together. Resources should be channelled especially into helping Aboriginal women who were forced to give up their children and others in similar situations. While we are thinking about adoptions in Australia we should treat children of overseas adoptions with the same respect and help reunions to take place if desired. Cultural dislocation compounds the issue in these circumstances, as it can in the case of Aboriginal adoptions. People with cultural knowledge and understanding should work with these cases.

(The witness withdrew)

NETTI VANDERVELDE, Home duties, and

ANDREAS VANDERVELDE, Pensioner, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: In what capacity are you appearing before the Committee?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: As a mother who has adopted children.

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons signed by me?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of our inquiry?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I have a fair idea, yes.

CHAIR: Do you intend to make a statement, or shall we go straight through the questions?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I do not think we really need to make a statement.

CHAIR: You are appearing before the Committee as an adoptive parent?

Mr VANDERVELDE: Yes.

CHAIR: You received a summons and you are conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

Mr VANDERVELDE: Yes.

CHAIR: Can you explain to us what led to your initial decision to adopt a child, and in what year you made that decision?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I have some papers here. Can I quote them?

CHAIR: Yes, if you feel comfortable reading the answers, that is fine. However you want to do it.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: We tried for nearly five years to have children, and we were unable to have children, so we decided to adopt. We were approved in December 1966 by the Presbyterian Adoption Agency. On 19 December we got another letter asking all the questions: what our house was, what money we had, why we wanted to adopt children and all these things. Then soon after that we got Michael; he was approved. He was born on 1 February 1967.

CHAIR: How long was it from when you first approached the Presbyterian agency?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: First we tried the Child Welfare Department, and they approved us. But then somebody said, "You can go quicker with your own religion." So we went to the Presbyterian Adoption Agency, then cancelled the one with the Child Welfare. Then they approved us and we very quickly had a baby after that.

CHAIR: You approached them and they then sent you written material to fill in?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes. We got these letters asking for full names and addresses, full particulars, if we had been divorced or anything like that, particulars of the home, number of bedrooms, how many cars we had, and two people had to sign for a character reference, the day we got married, my maiden name and if we already had children. It was about 12 questions.

CHAIR: Did you have interviews of any sort with the agency?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes, we went to the adoption agency and we were interviewed by [agency worker 1] and [agency worker 2].

CHAIR: Did they ask you lots of questions, did they provide you with advice, assistance or information about adoption?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Just general questions. It was all very simple and straightforward.

CHAIR: Questions more about yourselves?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: About ourselves, where we lived and how we lived. We have a 20-acre property, so they said it was very nice to bring up children in that area. It was all very smooth and straightforward.

CHAIR: Did you make any specific requests, whether you wanted a boy or a girl, or the age? Did they ask you any of those sorts of questions?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: They asked us at first if we would like a boy. Most parents like a boy first, so we said, "Yes, we would like a boy and then a girl." They asked us how many children we would like and we said, "Well, we would like a family of four," because I am from a family of four so I thought it was a nice number. We ended up adopting four children, then we were fortunate enough to have one ourselves. So we ended up with five after 17 years.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: You have indicated to us for the record that you had adopted four children, which we knew. You have told us about how you went about the first contact, and made the first adoption. Were there any special procedures after that or anything you would like to tell us about the subsequent adoptions?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: No. We never asked. We asked if we could have four children. For the second one the paperwork just arrived and we filled in exactly the same papers as we did for the first one. Some 18 months after the first one we had a little

girl. Then three years after that the same thing again, we had another little girl. Then three years after that we had a little boy.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: The adoption agency contacted you at these intervals you have described and said that a child was available for adoption?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes. Because it was getting more difficult to adopt children we thought that we were not going to have any more and we had given up hope. The last one arrived in January, straight after the Darwin disaster. We had given away all the baby clothes.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: What sort of steps did the agency take to prepare you for the first adoption and each subsequent adoption? Do you recall receiving any assessment or counselling about your role as adoptive parents or the impact of adoption on your family life?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Not really. They did ask us what our family thought of it. At first my father was against it, until we got a baby and he just fell in love, and that was it. We have no problem with the whole family. They are very well accepted in the family.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: By the sound of it the agency assumed that you would be like any other parents: perhaps you would have your ups and downs but you would seek either their assistance or the assistance of other services that were available?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: They did come to see us each time after we adopted a baby. I think they came to see us when the first one was about five or six months old. [Agency worker 1] came to see us with another lady, whose name I do not know. One time [agency worker 2] came. Then [agency worker 1] came twice more after the other children. That is about the only contact we ever had with them.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: You were satisfied with that level of contact? You did not feel that they left you in the lurch?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: We were desperate to have children, so we accepted anything and everything. Whatever they told us we accepted because we did not know any better. What could you do? You have the children and we were sort of the innocent party. We did not know anything about what was going on.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: You did not feel that you were in any way disadvantaged by that lack of contact from the agency to monitor in greater depth your relationship with the child?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I do not know. We have never really thought about it.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: It sounds as though you were satisfied with the circumstances.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes, because what do we do?

Mr VANDERVELDE: There was nothing else we could to.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: We did not know anything.

Mr VANDERVELDE: We were very happy when we got the baby. He is a great boy.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: We accepted it. At the time we were told, as I told Michael's mother, that they were English and that her mother had died. They told us that her father did not care any more and Michael's mother went haywire, and that is how she conceived Michael. That is the story we were told. They could have told us anything and everything. We believed it.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What information was given to you about the parents of your first adopted child? Did you receive any information about the medical or social background of the parents?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: No. I just said that we were told that they were English. That is the only thing we were told, and that the mother was very creative.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: Did this information influence your actions in relation to adopting the child, or your attitude towards any possible reunion with the child's birth parents?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I have always maintained that if any of the children wanted to meet their parents that I would help them all I could because, funnily enough, I knew all their names. We were not supposed to, but somehow or another we knew all four of the children's names before we gave them their names. I have always had them written down and put in a file in case something happened to us and the children had to know their names for some reason. We told them straight away that they were adopted. We never kept it from them. We always said, "If you want to find out anything we hope you will tell us about it and we will help you all we can."

CHAIR: Can I go back a step to when you said that you were told details about the first child's mother. Is it the case that you were actually told things that were not true as you discovered later?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: At the time, we did not know. We would have believed anything and everything, but since then we have found that none of it was true.

CHAIR: So the Presbyterian adoption agency -

Mrs VANDERVELDE: They had lied to us with this particular first adoption, yes, but I do not know about the others.

CHAIR: By the time you found that out, it was too late, obviously, for you to go back?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes. I mean, the chance was there for the six weeks to ask for the baby back and we knew that. We were quite prepared to hand the baby back if the need arose, but never was anything said or done about it.

CHAIR: So you were given untrue information about the mother?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Yes.

CHAIR: Presumably that was designed to emphasise the fact-

Mrs VANDERVELDE: - that the child would be better off with us. That was the idea behind it.

CHAIR: Thinking back, do you have any comment to make on the motives of the people at the agency who gave you the information? How did it fit in with what they were talking to you about?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: At the time, as I said, there was nothing sinister or anything about it. Maybe in their wisdom they thought they were doing the right thing. I really do not know. I do not know.

CHAIR: In relation to the other children you adopted, you do not know whether you were given accurate or inaccurate information?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I do not know. I feel that the third one - I have always had the feeling that she is a twin. I did ring up and ask if twins were split up and they said that they used to split them up, but not any more after she was adopted. But she has seen somebody and she said it was like looking in a mirror.

CHAIR: At the time you adopted her, they said that they were splitting twins?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: They said not when she was adopted, but in the few years since Michael was adopted they still did split up twins. Who is to say that six years later they still did not split them up? I mean, it was a good business and there was a lot of money. The only thing that has upset me the most was two years ago we got a letter asking us for money to send towards the mothers finding their babies. It was a letter stating "A plea for help from the Post Adoption Resource Centre", and they asked us for money or if we would send money. I rang her up and I said, "Look, I totally agree if the mothers want to find their babies. I am fully behind them but to ask us for money I think it is a bit over the top." We are the parents of these children and the children do not know any better than that we are the parents. To ask us for money I thought was a bit much.

Mr VANDERVELDE: In the first place, we had to pay for the adoptions and then we had to pay the solicitor. Then they came back and asked us for money to find the adopted children.

CHAIR: You had to pay the Presbyterian agency each time?

Mr VANDERVELDE: Yes.

CHAIR: Was that a very big amount of money?

Mr VANDERVELDE: It was \$40 in those days.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: It was \$40 to the adoption agency and the solicitor - the first one was \$82, and it got dearer as time went on. I think the last one was \$100, which is a terrible amount of course for which to sell a baby. But, as I said, we would have paid anything.

CHAIR: You said that somehow you got the names of the four children. How did you manage to do that?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I do not know. I think with Michael, the paperwork was there and his name was on his birth certificate. I never saw the name of the mother, but I saw his name because he seemed to be curious somehow. With Joanne, it was written on her papers as well and the same with the other two. With one of them, I actually had the paper in my hand and I turned it over. Her name was on the back.

Mr VANDERVELDE: The solicitor told us but they never should have said it to us.

Mrs VANDERVELDE: I was happy that I had them because that way I could put them in my file. If the children ever asked for it, at least I had something to go on.

CHAIR: Can you tell us about how your first child came to be reunited with his mother?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: His mother, apparently, never stopped looking for him. She ended up having a piece in the Catholic church paper. She had found out since then that we were Dutch. I do not know whether she found that we were under the Dutch congregation here in Ultimo. A lady in Wollongong rang the Dutch minister and said, "Have you got children in your congregation who are adopted?" He said, "No." His wife said, "That's Nettie and Andries. They have adopted children." He rang us up and he

said, "This is what is happening. What are you going to do about it?" I said, "Well, what can I do about it?"

I rang the adoption agency. She said, "There is a letter here and a tape from Michael's mother. It has been here for a long time." I said, "Send it out and I will see what I can do about it." I told Michael about it and he got terribly upset. I said, "I will leave it with you. If you want to listen to it and read it, it is up to you. I cannot do anything about it." It took him a couple of days and he ended up listening to it.

I left it for a while again and then I said, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to ring her?" I do not know how I got the phone number. I think I found it in the phone book. I rang her up and she started to cry and so did I. I said, "I will ring you back." She said, "No, no, no. I want to talk to you now." I said, "No, I will ring you back." So an hour later, I rang her back and I told her all different names. Apparently she had been onto quite a lot of people and somebody said to her, "I have got your child. I hate the child", and all that sort of thing.

She wanted to know straight away where we lived. She was going to hop in the car there and then and come over. I said, "No, because we have Michael to consider. It is no skin off my nose: he is my son. We have got him to consider." We decided that we would meet, of all places, in front of the Richmond air base. We sat the whole day in the car in the pouring rain and ate bread rolls and drank coffee and cried and talked. She wanted to know where we lived and I said, "No, I am not going to tell you." We left it again.

A few weeks later I had a talk with Michael and he said, "Mum, I want you to go with me." So the two of us went together up there and he met his family. He met his grandmother which was a good thing because she has passed away since then. It sort of went on from there. They have stayed in contact. That is about it. Now she has got a little granddaughter from him as well so at least that makes up for a little bit of it.

CHAIR: Are there any similar sorts of stories about the other children that would throw any light on our inquiry?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: We do not know anything about the other children - nothing at all.

CHAIR: There have been no reunions and no contact of any sort?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: No, nothing at all. Because Joanne was sick for a while, I rang up. She asked us to come over but there was nothing in her background. I only wanted to know for sure that there was nothing in Joanne's background that could have caused what happened. At the time she was married to this fellow who was giving her medication and just about drove the child mad. He told her she was schizo and all that type of thing. I went straight to these people and I said, "I want to find out about her background and see that there is nothing wrong with her." Since then she has left him and since remarried and she is living happily in Holland with two little girls. We have lost her to Holland.

CHAIR: The agency was able to check her background?

Mrs VANDERVELDE: Her medical background, yes.

(The witnesses withdrew)

PERCY CHARLES HARROLD, Director, Adventist Health Department, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Did you receive a summons under my hand?

Dr HARROLD: I did.

CHAIR: Are you conversant with the terms of reference of the inquiry?

Dr HARROLD: I am.

CHAIR: Do you wish to start with a statement of any sort, or do you wish to go straight to the questions?

Dr HARROLD: I am happy to go straight to the questions.

CHAIR: Can you briefly describe the adoption services offered by the Seventh-day Adventist Church between 1950 and the present day?

Dr HARROLD: The adoption service offered by the Seventh Day Adventist Church in New South Wales has always been a small agency. It began in about 1944 and continued until 1994. Most of the time it operated out of the regional office for the

church in Strathfield and had usually a staff of two people.

CHAIR: Can you describe the circumstances in which a mother would be referred to the agency?

Dr HARROLD: I personally have not been involved with the agency as it is closed down. Of the two main people who are still alive who were working with the agency, one has a husband in hospital at the moment and the other is in Queensland, so I have gained information from them. Their description of how a mother would come is that most were referred by other people or other agencies to the adoption agency, who may have heard about it from somewhere else in the State or from a friend who knew about the agency.

CHAIR: In the main, they were members of the church?

Dr HARROLD: No. The estimate that I have is that about 50 per cent were not Seventh-day Adventists and about 50 per cent were. That would vary from year to year, but that is the average.

CHAIR: What type of care was provided to mothers who were referred to the agency? For example, was there residential accommodation?

Dr HARROLD: As far as I have been able to ascertain, there was no residential accommodation offered. But the people I am speaking to can only go back to the early 1970s. The records for the period before that time have been handed over to the government, and we do not have those records to look at at this stage, and the principals involved at that time have died.

CHAIR: What sort of care was available then?

Dr HARROLD: There were interviews conducted with the mothers, and where possible they were helped with finding accommodation and care.

CHAIR: Was any financial assistance provided?

Dr HARROLD: Not that I am aware of.

CHAIR: So it was really in an advisory capacity?

Dr HARROLD: Yes, it was more in an advisory capacity.

CHAIR: What about counselling in terms of the choice that they had to make, and so on?

Dr HARROLD: In speaking with the two people who are still alive who are involved, they both emphasised strongly to me that the counselling that was given before the baby was born was to cover all options that were available legally at that time and then for the mother to make her choice. Then, following the birth, further counselling was provided as required, but with the birth mother making the choice.

CHAIR: Did the care provided to mothers change during the period under review, and if so what changes took place?

Dr HARROLD: I cannot really answer that question clearly. I am not aware of the actual fine differences in the care that was offered.

CHAIR: Or the changes in legislation?

Dr HARROLD: As the legislation changed, the agency went with that legislation and obeyed it as it was required to do.

CHAIR: Did the staff have any professional or particular qualifications? For example, was there anyone who was trained in social work?

Dr HARROLD: Yes. For a period between 1970 and 1994 there was on two occasions a social worker attached to the team on a part-time basis. The Principal Officer went through a period of training and received the appropriate certification before taking over as the Principal Officer. Before that she had worked with the previous principal officer as his assistant. The other person involved at that stage was a Minister of Religion, who himself had adopted children previously and was involved in the committee, in association with the State Government, on adoption processes.

CHAIR: Did the church itself have any advisory committee or supervisory committee? When you say that the agency operated from the regional office at Strathfield, did that mean that it had association with other wings of the church?

Dr HARROLD: Not in a committee structure at all, as far as I am aware, except for the local regional office where they reported their operations, and their operations were supervised by the administration in the Sydney area.

CHAIR: Are you able to advise the Committee about the philosophy of the agency during the period under review and whether that philosophy changed over the 50 years we are talking about?

Dr HARROLD: I have a copy of the philosophy, which I included as part of the submission. I will read that philosophy, if I may.

CHAIR: What is the date of it?

Dr HARROLD: This is the current philosophy for 1987. I do not have any from before that time that I have been able to access.

CHAIR: Was that philosophy new in 1987, or was it simply a rerun of a previous one?

Dr HARROLD: In talking with the two people who are still alive who are involved, this was basically the philosophy of the operation from the 1970s right through. The basic philosophy statement reads as follows:

The adoption agency believes that adoption is an option for some people where a permanent home and family can be given to a child who, for whatever reason, cannot remain with its natural parents. It is important that the adopting home, with two parents, husband and wife, should be a place where the principles of Christianity are practised. The agency has always worked towards the mutual benefit and satisfaction of all parties in the adoption process. The agency subscribes to the philosophies espoused by the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which states, among other things, that the needs of the child are paramount.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What type of advice and counselling was provided to mothers both prior to and after the birth of their child? In particular, were they advised about the alternatives to adoption, the long-term consequences of adoption for themselves and their children, or the 30-day revocation period?

Dr HARROLD: During the period that I have documentation for, the various legal options were canvassed with the mother before and after the birth. The decision was left to her as to what action she would take. The 30-day revocation period was explained to her and was observed very, very carefully. In talking with one of the people who were involved, she told me that on one occasion on the 30th day one of the mothers revoked her previous consent for adoption at that late stage. What I find from the record is that, over a couple of years that I have records for, about 40 to 50 per cent would revoke their decision during that 30-day period.

The Hon. H. S. TSANG: What procedures were in place for the taking of consents to adoption by the agency?

Dr HARROLD: Taking of consent could have occurred by different people given different circumstances. It may have been a Minister of Religion, a Justice of the Peace, one of the agency's staff or a social worker, depending on where the baby was born. Sometimes these procedures were undertaken by the hospital itself, in place of the agency. The consent was discussed with the mother before the birth, then she was left to make her own decision, and then to change her mind, if she wanted to, afterwards. The interview at the hospital was sometimes conducted by hospital staff and sometimes by the agency staff.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Did the consent-taking process change during the period under review, and if so what changes took place?

Dr HARROLD: I cannot give you the exact details of the changes that took place during the period under review, particularly as I do not have access to records of the early stages. But what I can tell you from discussing this with the people who were involved is that as the requirements changed from decade to decade, the changes in obtaining the consent were followed as they should have been.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Are you aware of any instance where taking of consents was unethical in your opinion, or perhaps unlawful?

Dr HARROLD: No, I am not.

[*Interruption*]

CHAIR: I have just discovered that, because of a mix-up, the witness only saw the Committee's questions just before stepping forward to give evidence. Of course, he should have been provided with the questions well before that time. The Committee must listen to what the witness has to say. We are taking all sorts of evidence and hearing different points of view, but we must hear it.

Dr HARROLD: Having worked as a doctor in several areas of Australia, I have become aware that there have been times when people were not approached properly by various agencies. I have heard of one instance, but I am not sure of the rest of the facts in the situation, and that is why I said that I am not aware of any instance where it had actually occurred.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: What types of processes did the agency have in place for the assessment of prospective adoptive parents?

Dr HARROLD: There was a formal assessment of prospective adoptive parents. If I may read from my list, that may be a simple way to put it. First, prospective applicants for adoption must attend a series of adoption information seminars, the cost of which will form part of the total administration fee. Those seminars were usually conducted by the Anglican agency. Prospective adoptive parents were required to attend them as part of the process. Because it was a Seventh-day Adventist agency at least one party to the adoption application should be a practising member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and provide a reference from their local Minister.

These are all part of the formal statement that the agency had. They must have been married for at least two years. They must be bona fide residents of New South Wales, which was a requirement of the law. Neither applicant should be older than 35 years at the time of application and couples must have had the full range of investigations at the time for infertility. Apart from their

infertility, applicants should be in reasonable health, this being confirmed by their doctor. If either applicant suffers from a chronic disability or illness - for example, diabetes - evidence should be submitted that the applicant's life ability and his or her ability to care for a young child will not be adversely affected by the disability or illness. Applicants should be financially stable. Applicants should have adequate accommodation for a child. They do not necessarily have to own their own home. Those were the basic requirements which the prospective applicants were taken through. They were also visited in their homes by the agency staff to assess the function of the family or the couple and how their home functioned before a decision was made. Some were rejected during this process.

The Hon. D. F. MOPPETT: Looking at the perspective of the adoptive parents, are you aware of any occasion when the baby was placed with the adoptive parents during the 30-day period prior to the lapse of the revocation option?

Dr HARROLD: I am not aware of any. I specifically asked that question of the two people who are alive and they said that on no occasion was the baby placed within the 30 days.

CHAIR: Where would the baby have been, going back to your answer that the agency did not provide residential care or financial assistance to the mother; she had to provide it for herself?

Dr HARROLD: There were two specific families and a third family registered with the Government to act as foster parents. If they received a baby girl she would be called baby Jane. If it was a boy it would be called baby Brian. That is the only information the foster parents were given. They would care for the child during the 30-day period. They did it time and time again. So they were used to handling the situation.

CHAIR: Did the agency have an arrangement or deal mostly with certain hospitals? I am thinking of the taking of consents and so on and where all of that took place. Did the mother come back to the agency? How did that work geographically?

Dr HARROLD: The only hospital mentioned to me was Blacktown Hospital. That was one occasion but it was not related to your question. That is the only one that comes into my mind. Babies were born at a number of hospitals and in different cities around the State.

CHAIR: So the taking of consent would have occurred at the hospital?

Dr HARROLD: Usually.

CHAIR: By someone from the agency going to the hospital?

Dr HARROLD: Or by someone at the hospital who was a staff member or a social worker.

CHAIR: And then the paperwork would have come back to the agency?

Dr HARROLD: That is right.

CHAIR: What role did the father of the child have in the adoption process as far as the agency was concerned? Are you aware of whether fathers were ever consulted in relation to the adoption?

Dr HARROLD: On occasions the father was consulted. I also asked this specific question of my contacts. Most times the mother did not tell who the father was but there were times when she did. He was not involved in the process at that time. If he had come forward to do so he would have been. One or two were but most were not.

CHAIR: You have probably partly answered the next question about whether the agency had any written procedures in relation to adoption during the period. You told us the philosophy before but I was thinking more of procedures.

Dr HARROLD: Most of the documentation that I have refers to the adoptive parents. Is that what you are asking?

CHAIR: The procedures in general, whether it was relating to the taking of consents or in relation to the adoptive parents, which you gave us before.

Dr HARROLD: I do not have any documentation on the actual protocol for the taking of a consent, only verbal reporting of that.

CHAIR: Do you have any statistics on the number of adoptions arranged by the agency and, following that, the number of revocations? What other records are available?

Dr HARROLD: I have only brief statistics. I have a rough figure of approximately 200 adoptions taking place through the agency before 1970. The only other figures that I have occurred as we approached the end of the 1980s when the numbers were down to only several a year. Then in the early 1990s with such a small number it was decided to close the agency and let another agency handle them.

CHAIR: Earlier you said that the old adoption records were handed over to the Government.

Dr HARROLD: Yes.

CHAIR: I do not know exactly what that means. What feedback about past practices does the agency receive from parents and others affected by adoption?

Dr HARROLD: From speaking with people involved with the agency I know that one still has an active contact with many people who have been birth mothers or adopted children or adoptive parents. They contact her and she refers them to the appropriate agency if they want to track relatives.

CHAIR: We are more interested in finding out whether, for instance, there are allegations of improper practices of any sort or what sort of concerns are expressed after the event about the kinds of practices that went on in the past.

Dr HARROLD: Only one comes to mind where there has been an allegation of an improper practice. But as I explained earlier, I have not seen all the evidence in that case. But there has been one allegation.

CHAIR: What measures do you think might assist people suffering distress as a result of past adoption practices?

Dr HARROLD: In talking with the people who have been involved with the process, they both said independently that they see that a reunion is always worthwhile, regardless of whether it leads to continuing contact. They are happy to help facilitate that by referring people to the appropriate agencies which can help with that. From a personal viewpoint as someone who has been involved as a medical practitioner for many years dealing with patients who have adopted out their children or children who have been adopted or people who have adopted children into their family I personally have found that sitting and talking with someone and getting counselling on the subject, if there is a problem, is always helpful and beneficial.

CHAIR: Do you think that an apology by relevant agencies would assist people suffering distress as a result of past adoption practices?

Dr HARROLD: In those where there was something illegal or improper done, I would say yes. When we take it in the context of the environment at the time, it could be difficult to apologise for something that appeared to be the correct thing to be doing at the time and in line with current mores. For that reason I would like to read something to the Committee.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in New South Wales operated an adoption agency in accordance with legislation current during the period under review. It worked within the social and legal framework of the time keeping close contact with the relevant government agencies. To each of the participants in the adopting process - the birth mother, the father, the child and the adoptive parents - the staff acted with compassion and, hopefully, in a humane fashion. The giving up for adoption of a child is never an easy decision; nor is it a painless procedure. The pain lingers on for life in many instances. Each of these mothers is a person of great worth but she suffers a sense of permanent loss. For this loss and trauma the church expresses its sorrow. For the adopted child there can be the stress of finding his or her personal identity and the struggle to contact birth parents. This can be traumatic. For this trauma the church expresses its sorrow.

(The witness withdrew)