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PRESS RELEASE

Women Lawyers Call for Better Protections for the Mentally Ill

More transparency and better protections for the mentally ill are needed in the administration of procedures for the holding of detainees in immigration detention centres, says the Women Lawyers' Association of New South Wales (WLA NSW). The devastating fiasco which has unveiled the identity of Cornelia Rau should have opened the Federal Government's eyes to the fact that this is the case.

The government is well aware of the detrimental effects that the conditions in immigration detention centres have on the mental health of detainees. It was only in May last year that the findings of the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention were tabled in Federal Parliament. Evidence given by experts on mental health and child protection during the Inquiry led the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to conclude that the Federal Government had failed to take all appropriate measures to protect and promote the mental health of children in detention.

Provisions of the Migration Act which mandate that officers hold detainees in detention centres should be looked at closer by government. Cornelia Rau didn't breach any Australian migration law to earn her place in an isolation cell. She was detained on the basis of a suspicion that she was an illegal immigrant, and by law, officers were required to detain her once they held such a suspicion. How acceptable is it for anyone with a mental illness to ever be subjected to the tough conditions in Baxter and other detention centres for ten months, whether they are suspected of being, or known for sure to be, an illegal immigrant? WLA NSW is appalled at the lack of systemic protections for the mentally ill that have resulted in a vulnerable member of the Australian community being detained for nearly one year of her life.

Just how safe from the grasp of immigration detention is anyone in Australia with a mental illness, who speaks a language other than English? "If my now deceased Uncle who suffered from a mental illness and spoke limited English was still alive, came from Malaysia to visit me, and wandered off while he was travelling in Queensland, I'd like to be rest assured that the last place I'd have to look for him was in Baxter detention centre," says Lee-May Saw, WLA Media Officer.

"What's being done to lift the sinking confidence that the Australian public has in a system that was already under attack?"

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