

OFFICIAL OPENING – KEYNOTE SPEECH

By

Mr Peter Boyce, Health and Community Services Complaints Commissioner

The Health and Community Services Complaints Commission began operation on 1 July 1998 and was officially launched by Mr Boyce on 14 September 1998. At the launch he said:

“Thank you for coming to what I consider to be a very significant occasion for the people of the Northern Territory – the opening of an independent Commission to assist Territories to resolve their complaints with health service and community service providers.

It all started just over 2 years ago when Government (either because they could not think of anyone else or, as I would like to think, in their wisdom) made me responsible for servicing health complaints. Their picture of such a service at the time was the establishment of a unit attached to the Office of the Ombudsman, covering public hospitals and mental health services.

I am proud to say that what the public of the Northern Territory have ended up with is not the somewhat narrow focus seen as appropriate two years ago but a Commission that is the equal to similar services in Australia. We have an independent Commission that:

- *provides coverage for all health services and community services, such as government and non-government services, public and private services, mainstream and alternative services, and health services, aged services and services for the disabled;*
- *is co-located with the Office of the Ombudsman; and*
- *has its own legislative framework and resources.*

The changes that were agreed to by Government – from the narrow focus in 1996 to the broad focus we see today – result from the comments and opinions expressed to both myself and the Minister following a major consultation process. The Government is to be congratulated for its foresight and willingness to go beyond its obligations in the Medicare Agreement.

The Commission as it is today owes much to the people and organisations that participated at these consultations and responded to our draft proposals. In particular, the Commission owes much to the lively debates and discussions that took place between myself, the NT branch of the AMA and the various Registration Boards.

There have been some interesting moments over the past two years. For example:

- *the time when public meetings were advertised and held in Alice Springs, Tennant Creek, Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Darwin and only two members of the public turned up – Syd Stirling , MLA, in Nhulunbuy and John Elferink, MLA, in Alice Springs; or*
- *the most vigorous, and possibly the most interesting debates I had while drafting the legislation occurred between the Deputy Ombudsman at the time, Tom Galloway, the Project Manager, Vic Feldman and myself over a few bottles of red over several weekends. One could be forgiven for thinking that the Act owes a great deal to Wirra Wirra Church Block; or*
- *on a more serious note, the efforts put in by the Project team in developing mechanisms to improve the cross-cultural effectiveness of the Commission being recognised by receiving 1st prize in the Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) and Office of Commissioner for Public Employment (OCPE) 1997 Equity Awards for the Small Agency Category. Part of these mechanisms include the likely employment of two Aboriginal Officers in Training which I anticipate will start sometime this year; or*
- *the manager of the project to establish the Commission, Vic Feldman, being highly commended for his efforts in the Northern Territory's 1998 Manager of the Year Awards.*

The Commission has four staff – myself as the Commissioner, a Deputy Commissioner and two Conciliation/Investigation Officers. In addition, Central Australia is serviced locally by the two Ombudsman staff located in Alice Springs. We actually opened our doors to the public on 1 July 1998.

The Commission under the Act, has four major objectives:

- *to provide an independent, just, fair and accessible mechanism for resolving complaints between users and providers of health services and community services;*
- *to encourage and assist users and providers to resolve complaints directly with each other;*
- *to promote and enable users and providers to contribute to improvements in health services and community services; and*
- *to promote and encourage an awareness of the rights and responsibilities of users and providers of health services and community services.*

As the newly appointed Commissioner I can assure you that a major emphasis of the Commission will be on encouraging and assisting users and providers to resolve their complaints directly. The Commission will not usurp a provider's responsibility to try to resolve complaints directly with a user in the first instance.

Once we do accept a complaint, our main emphasis will be on trying to resolve it by conciliating, both formally and informally, between the two parties involved. Interstate experience has shown that conciliation is an effective means of resolving disputes and is a viable alternative to resolution through costly legal processes.

The Commission has developed three pamphlets to spread its message. The pamphlets are currently being distributed throughout the Territory.

I intend for the Commission to be proactive in making providers aware of the need for good communication and assisting and encouraging them to implement effective internal complaint handling mechanisms. I have already held three workshops in Darwin specifically for front line staff relating to best practice in complaint management, with particular emphasis on improving communication skills. I intend to hold similar workshops in other centres throughout the Territory.

A major challenge facing the Commission is the development and implementation of processes that will assure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Territory become aware of, understand the functions of, and are able to access the Commission. My staff, together with Aboriginal Officers in Training, will be giving this task a high priority.

The other major challenge I have is to develop a Code of Health and Community Rights and Responsibilities over the next two years. This Code will become the basis against which providers will be assessed as to whether or not they have provided a reasonable standard of service to the user. Extensive consultation will take place with all stakeholders in the development of this Code and I look forward to receiving widespread input into this process.

Thank you for coming along today and for all your support and assistance to date. I look forward to your continuing support and a positive and productive relationship with you all in the future.

I now have much pleasure in formally declaring the Health and Community Services Complaints Commission open for business.”