

We call on other consumers/survivors, allies and supporters to join us.

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An open letter to the ABC

by people with lived experience, consumers and/or survivors of the mental health system

Dear ABC,

We are compelled to write to you about your recent Four Corners TV episode, '[Please don't judge us](#)'.

This letter is written by people with lived experience, consumers and/or survivors of the mental health system. You may not be aware of us, since not one of us was interviewed in your program. It was as though you thought that we are not quite human, that we cannot speak for ourselves.

We can see that you wanted to produce an episode which bravely tackled issues in the mental health system. We suspect you wanted to make an important societal contribution to people and families who need help. There is no doubt that mental and emotional distress affects everyone, and that carers and families can live through very difficult times as they try to find a way to help for their family member.

But we need you to know that you have failed. Badly.

Your story has caused harm, grief and sadness. You have just made stigma and discrimination worse for thousands of Australians like us. You have stolen and silenced our voice. And you have promoted psychiatric practices and a system in which many people experience institutional violence, abuse, and inhumane treatment (see below in item 3).

So, we'd like you to know why you got it wrong. Then we ask you to take action to make up for the damage that you have wrought, and to be true to:

- Your charter to serve the public interest
- Your editorial policy to include a diversity of perspectives
- Your editorial policy to avoid the use of stereotypes and discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice.

From our perspective, you made three grave errors.

1. We are overwhelmingly *not* violent – more commonly we are victims of violence and trauma. Yet you reinforced sensationalist stereotypes that we are dangerous, scary people.

Your production positioned us as people to be feared. As demonised, violent, dangerous, unpredictable 'others'. This is a clear stereotype. We only account for 4-5%

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of violent crime in Australia, and even then, this is often not due to mental illness, but factors common to violence committed by anyone.

Your focus on violence was reminiscent of media coverage which vilifies other classes of people. Like media that blames violence on so-called 'African gangs'. Or media that blames Muslim people for terrorism. Another [ABC story](#) critiqued this kind of blaming, "lazy shorthand" in media reporting on "African gangs". For us, too, this "lazy shorthand" does nothing but promote fear and hate, while avoiding the uncomfortable truth about violence: it is complicated, and it is not the fault of any particular group of people.

The sad truth about violence and mental distress is *the opposite* of what you proposed. While very few of us are violent, a great majority of us, 80% or more, have been victims of violence. That's often why we end up in distress and crisis. Violence is far more often *a cause* of mental health problems, not *a consequence* of them.

2. It is unacceptable to produce stories about us, that exclude our voice.

You would not produce a story on women that only interviewed men. You would not produce a story on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without interviewing them. Well, we certainly hope not. So why on earth would you produce a story about us, that only interviewed carers, families and psychiatrists?

Perhaps you don't know that we are capable of speaking for ourselves, and that many of us work as active agents of change throughout the mental health system and society. As academics, peer workers, advocates, policy advisors and educators. We have peak bodies in most states. We are also parents, artists, writers, and sometimes even quite ordinary, boring people. Some of us even work for the ABC!

Perhaps you do not know that many of us experience recovery and healing. Even those of us diagnosed with 'schizophrenia' and 'psychosis'. Perhaps you may be surprised to hear that many of us even recover and heal without psychiatry and medication.

It is important that carers and families have a voice to talk about their own needs and issues. But they cannot, and do not, speak for us – they speak for themselves. A properly critical investigative story would have understood and appreciated these different vantage points.

3. More hospital beds and medication are NOT what we want or need.

It is no surprise when psychiatrists call for more funding. Every industry group does that. It is no surprise that carers and families call for us to be hospitalised and medicated, because they are scared for us and they don't know what else to do.

But we've lived through hospitals and medication. What's more, we've lived through recovery and healing, so we know what works. Sure, hospitals and medication are helpful for some of us. But for a great many, psychiatric medications are ineffective and

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the evidence shows that they can be seriously harmful and impact mortality. There is no simple or magic fix here.

Psychiatric hospitals are places where many of us experience profound institutional violence and human rights violations; think youth detention centres, or mandatory detention of asylum seekers. Robust professional journalistic investigation, with 'balance and perspective', would have unearthed this very quickly. We agree that changes are desperately needed in how we respond to mental and emotional distress, but it is simplistic and dangerous to assume this means more beds and more meds. The changes needed are complex, and we have lots of ideas about them – but they must be grounded in human rights, choice, and our voices.

We want an acknowledgement, apology, and an opportunity to be heard

Your TV episode has done serious harm to us as individuals, and as a community of people who experience the mental health system. Too often, we lose friends and family who are frightened by reporting like yours. And yet there are claims for more inclusion. Sadly your reporting was divisive.

Now, we risk losing even more human connection, face more discrimination, and perhaps we are even more likely to be detained and forcibly medicated against our will. In terms of harm done, plenty; in terms of good done, it is hard to see any potentially helpful outcomes from your story.

This undermines our human rights and our humanity, and it demands redress.

We call on you to:

- **Publicly acknowledge the serious failings in this episode and apologise.** You failed to speak with us, the actual people you were talking about. And you misrepresented us in a harmful way.
- **Produce a different kind of show, where you hear from us.** Introduce your viewers to the psychiatric consumer/survivor human rights movement, consumer workers and activists, and the innovative and critical work we are doing to transform mental health, here and overseas. In giving us voice about our own lives, perhaps we can begin to undo some of the harm you have done.

We want you to understand that, as a class of people, we face profound levels of discrimination, hate, violence and silencing of our voice – and you have contributed to this.

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We know that Four Corners and the ABC can do, and has done, outstandingly ethical investigative reporting, despite the failures of this episode. We need you, as our national broadcaster, to be our allies for change, not part of what hurts and excludes us.

Yours sincerely,

We, the undersigned, are all people with a lived experience, consumers and/or survivors of the mental health system.

Paula Arro, Chair, Brisbane North Peer Participation in Mental Health Services Network
Matt Ball
Nicky Bright
Robyn Callaghan
Deb Carlon
Bianca Childs
Indigo Daya, Survivor academic & activist
Vrinda Edan
Rebecca Egan
Heidi Everett
Shauna Gaebler
Flick Grey, Lived experience workforce trainer, supervisor & consultant
Tim Heffernan
Ellie Hodges
Fay Jackson, General Manager, Inclusion, Flourish Australia

Sandy Jeffs
Hamilton Kennedy
Phoebe Kingston, Consumer Activist
Eila Lyon
Lyn Mahboub
Laura McWhae
Leah McKenner
Joanne Newman
Rachel Oliver
Rory Randall
Ailsa Rayner
Helena Roennfeldt
Cath Roper
Dave Peters
Aimee Sinclair
Brooke Starr
Trish Tran
Amanda Waegeli
Terry Warner

As allies and supporters of mental health consumers/survivors, we offer our support and endorsement to this open letter:

Paul Armitage
Associate Professor Susan Ainsworth
John Bamborough, General Manager Supported Independent Living Victoria, Mind Australia
Scientia Professor Jill Bennett, ARC Laureate Fellow, UNSW
Carla Clarence
Lorna Downes
Assoc Prof Bridget Hamilton, Director, Centre for Psychiatric Nursing
Erandathie Jayakody
Professor Jon Jureidini, Critical & Ethical Mental Health Research Group, University of Adelaide
Rebecca Jury

Simon Katterl
Professor Renata Kokanovic, Social and Global Studies Centre, RMIT University
Kerry Hawkins, Commissioner and President, WA Association for Mental Health
Dr Diana Johns, University of Melbourne
Dr Claire Loughnan
Dr Chris Maylea, RMIT
Dr Melissa Raven, University of Adelaide
Dr Kath Sellick, University of Melbourne
Dr Linda Steele, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law, University of Technology Sydney

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