MEDIA RELEASE

18 September 2017

Mental Health Complaints Commissioner launches sexual safety project

With the support of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Mental Health Complaints Commissioner (MHCC) has initiated a project to review how Victoria’s public mental health system is safeguarding the sexual safety of people, particularly women, receiving treatment in acute mental health inpatient units in Victoria’s public hospitals. The project will inform recommendations to mental health service providers, the Chief Psychiatrist and the Secretary of DHHS on ways to ensure the safety of people receiving mental health services.

The MHCC has received complaints from consumers, families and carers that range from consumers feeling unsafe in acute mental health inpatient units, to incidents of sexual activity, sexual harassment and alleged assaults in these environments. The MHCC is now finalising investigations relating to four of these complaints.

Mental Health Complaints Commissioner, Dr Lynne Coulson Barr said “these complaints indicate that more work is needed to recognise and address risks to people’s safety in inpatient environments, and prevent incidents and associated harms from occurring. The MHCC’s sexual safety project builds on the safety and quality findings and recommendations of the Targeting Zero: Supporting the Victorian Hospital System to Eliminate Avoidable Harm and Strengthen Quality Of Care report1.”

The MHCC’s project will analyse the circumstances that contribute to consumers feeling unsafe and to consider best practice approaches to ensuring sexual safety in public mental health services in Victoria. The project will consider the findings from the investigations conducted into these issues, as well as analysis of complaints raised with our office and those made directly to services where issues of sexual safety have been identified. These findings will inform detailed recommendations for service improvements to address areas such as risk assessments, orientation to acute inpatient units, approaches to trauma-informed care, prevention and response strategies and the effectiveness of women’s corridors and women-only areas in addressing the safety of women receiving inpatient care.

The project will also be informed by stakeholder interviews and a review of national and international literature and research on the causes and impact of sexual harassment and assault of people receiving treatment in acute mental health inpatient units, as well as evidence based strategies to ensure sexual safety in these environments.

A report from the project will be released by early 2018.

1 Targeting Zero: Supporting the Victorian Hospital System to Eliminate Avoidable Harm and Strengthen Quality Of Care report of the review of hospital safety and quality assurance in Victoria, October 2016, State of Victoria
This work will also take into account the range of initiatives that have been undertaken to date to promote gender safety and gender-sensitive practices, such as staff training and the creation of women-only areas in inpatient units. The MHCC has been actively involved in consultations and discussions with mental health services, the Chief Psychiatrist and DHHS on issues that have been identified in complaints.

“We have been encouraged by the level of interest and support for this project by all key stakeholders, and by work that individual services and the Chief Psychiatrist are carrying out to review relevant guidelines and practices,” said Commissioner Coulson Barr.

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**Background**

‘Sexual safety’ is defined by the Mental Health Complaints Commissioner as a state in which a person feels safe and is free from sexual activity, harassment, and assault.