

Submission to the Federal Inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol & other drugs

By Stephanie Taylor (personal submission)

My name is Stephanie and on 7 April 2022, my younger brother Richard died from the impact of alcohol abuse. I am writing in to the Federal Inquiry to address some of the Terms of Reference and to give you the perspective of a battle weary family member who fought endlessly to keep my brother alive, begged the healthcare system repeatedly to secure hospital detox beds, coveted rehab spots and endured countless years of heartache due to the impact of alcohol abuse.

As background, I come from a loving family in Sydney. My sister, brother and I grew up in the Northern Suburbs and were privileged to have a great education. We were taught to love, care for and support each other from a young age and always have each other's back. I provide this context so that you understand, even with this loving, family oriented support, access to help and resources and financial means, we struggled. I learnt very early on that alcohol and drug abuse does not discriminate. Once you are on the rollercoaster, it is very hard to get off.

I feel that Richard's alcoholism put my life on hold. He went to rehab nine (9) times before he died, some stints were 4 weeks long, his longest was 8 months long. It was ALL consuming. It was very hard to live a full life when you are on the rollercoaster.

Let me explain...in the lead up to securing a hospital detox bed and rehab place, you endure weeks and months of chaotic behaviour. For example, phone calls and texts at all hours, requests for money, not turning up to family events and work, or turning up to family events and work under the influence, isolating himself, injuring himself, finding him passed out, volatility and anger and losing his car. This happens on a daily basis while you are trying your best to maintain a job, support a family, be a good friend, daughter and sister. This is how it becomes ALL consuming, not to mention the impact on your physical, emotional and mental well-being.

When the weeks and months of chaotic behaviour became unmanageable, you begin the process of encouraging Richard to go to rehab. This is a soul destroying process as you learn very quickly hospital detox beds and rehab spots are incredible hard to secure. For example, each time our family reached the desperate point of encouraging Richard to go to rehab, it had to be on his terms. He was an adult who had ultimate control of whether he went to hospital detox and rehab. The number of phone calls I made to hospitals and rehabs in sheer desperation, crying and begging for help, only to be met with, 'call back in a month' or 'we do have a detox bed, but I'm sorry you are not in our local area' or 'can you please have Richard call us'. It was devastating to be told this when Richard was in no

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physical or mental state to call them himself. It could take us days to get Richard to the point of making a simple phone call.

My sister and I twice resorted to calling an Ambulance for him when we discovered him passed out or frothing at the mouth. We also took Richard to Hospital Emergency rooms pleading for help only to be told there were no beds available so they could not treat him. The advice given was that we should allow him to drink in moderation as if he went into withdrawal, it was dangerously unsafe, and he could die. Do you know how terrifying that is? On several occasions I witnessed Richard go into withdrawal, shaking uncontrollably, dry-retching and throwing up.

The ONLY option was to purchase alcohol for him and try to monitor it. Richard needed at least 1-1.5 bottles of vodka to function. There is NO such thing as allowing an alcoholic to drink in moderation. Anyone who tells you that, has no experience of life with an alcoholic. Watching an alcoholic drink is like watching someone kill themselves slowly. The fear and pressure of knowing you are doing everything in your ability to keep your loved one alive and safe, but the healthcare professionals are telling you they can't provide any meaningful help due to lack of resources and funding.

One of the biggest challenges for our family was access to services, even though my father paid for several private rehab stints for Richard. On some occasions, after days of ringing around, I would secure a rehab place for Richard, get him to a point of calling them to confirm he wanted to go to rehab, only to be told he must complete hospital detox first. We lost so many rehab places as we could not secure a hospital detox. On several occasions I would speak with a wonderful healthcare worker, very kind and compassionate, who had detox beds available but couldn't offer Richard a spot as he was not in the local area. What are you supposed to do? On more than five occasions, we would secure a hospital detox bed and/ or rehab spot for a few weeks away, but Richard would then decide he did not want to go.

When you reach the point of calling for a hospital detox bed/ rehab place you are desperate. Being told there are waiting lists of weeks and months is of NO help. I recall one conversation I had with a well-meaning healthcare worker where I explained that my brother might die before a hospital detox became available. Every single place Richard went, both hospital detox and rehab were ALWAYS full. There is, without question, a strong need for more services. Living in Sydney, you can't assume that a high population provides greater access to services.

One thing that would have helped our family more was education. I know there are great services such as Al-Anon (which I attended for years) and some of the rehabs Richard

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attended offered family programs. Some were informative and helpful, and some were not. We attended a family program at one rehab where we were encouraged to cut Richard off if he did not meet the boundaries we put in place. I felt at the time that this was clearly a process designed by someone who never had a loved one suffer with the disease of alcoholism.

I feel education needs to reach the whole community, not just those on the rollercoaster. There are a lot of assumptions around alcohol. Alcoholism is so prevalent in our society, yet little is understood about it. It is widely viewed that the disease of alcoholism affects the individual. THEY ARE WRONG. Alcoholism is a family disease and the family needs love and support too. Knowledge is power and if we had education provided at a young age on the harm alcohol causes, rather than continually seeing it celebrated, there might be a shift in thinking and understanding.

My brother Richard died from the impact of alcohol abuse on 7 April 2022. He was 45 years old and father to a beautiful boy. Our family has been left devastated by Richard's death. His last few months alive were an utter nightmare and we have all had serious health issues as a result. The health implications are not confined to the individual with the disease, they can and will impact everyone around them.

I am writing in to the Federal Inquiry to address some of the Terms of Reference so that there is an understanding of the harm caused by alcohol from a family perspective. Alcoholism is a family disease and if my story can effect change then I am proud to share it.

Thank you.