

Speech by Brian Howe to Launch the report

“FILLING THE DARK SPOT: FIFTEEN INJURED WORKERS SHINE THE LIGHT ON THE WORKERS COMPENSATION SYSTEM TO IMPROVE IT FOR OTHERS”

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The Creative Ministries Network (CMN) provides support to people affected by workplace injury and work related death also undertaking research into the links between workplace experiences and suicide and especially focusing on seeking to remedy the gap in research on work place injury and or illness through insufficient recognition of the importance of mental health and sense of personal well being.

In the CMN study a distinction is made as between the outcomes through processes of workplace compensation, rehabilitation and return to work on issues to do with peoples sense of their own health and well-being. The study recognizes that this process of treatment and recovery may **itself** be the cause of considerable distress for workers affecting very much their sense of physical and mental wellbeing. The study based on its individual case studies seeks to illustrate weaknesses in the Victorian Work Cover system especially drawing attention to the importance of the skill levels of case managers and return to work coordinators. **‘ Where these individuals were skilled both technically and interpersonally able to show empathy and humanity, the injured workers reported a better experience and one that enhanced their mental health and recovery’**. While the case studies reveal deficiencies in case management other aspects of the work cover system such as income support and financial assistance with medical and other expenses related to their injury are noted as positives, the focus on graduated return to work is the right policy and generally interaction of clients with health care providers is also seen as a positive..

The case studies notwithstanding these positives was being administered in ways that were perceived by these clients as overly bureaucratic and especially too adversarial. That is clients often felt that they were guilty until they were

able to establish their innocence, or sincerity, in making a claim for appropriate compensation and rehabilitation. Such a feeling was intensified when for whatever reason mistakes were made in the assessment process leading to delays and further pressures on individuals and their families at a time when people were feeling the weight of their illness or disease. **The study suggests that people suffering mental illness are often placed under greater pressure to provide evidence to confirm the nature and disabling nature of their illness may feel these problems more sharply and be distressed as a result.**

Workcover is essentially about social insurance designed to share equitably among employers the cost of insurance. There are always being pressures to reduce the cost of premiums and pressures on governments to avoid blowouts in expenditure. The Commonwealth Government in my experience was always wary of cost shifting because of the Commonwealth's exposure to high costs through Medicare.

Some of the strongest material in the study is to be found in the section covering interpersonal interaction with case managers, perhaps arising because of the tension between covering necessary administrative processes and the fact that Workcover is about moving from an initial assessment to a process of rehabilitation and return to work. Delays in the completion of this process as are illustrated in the case studies must mean delays in retraining and of then rehabilitation and thus an increasing possibility that rehabilitation may not be successful. It is important to recall that it was Owen Woodhouse, the New Zealand jurist, who first demonstrated in New Zealand the value of a universal no fault system of national workers compensation, argued that a work cover system preoccupied with proving fault would not only be more costly, it would also result in delays in treating the injury or illness. Also in commencing programs of treatment, rehabilitation and or retraining important in enabling people to return to the workforce. It may have taken forty years but the creation by the Commonwealth Government of National Disability Insurance is an important step in moving towards the full implementation of Woodhouse's approach in Australia.

The Creative Ministries Network has pursued research on issues associated with our working lives over the past thirty years. In doing so it has focused attention on issues that have not usually been seen as the concern of faith based communities or the agencies that serve them. Of course this was not always the case. Towards the end of the 19th C Pope Leo XIII published *Rerum Novarum* later in inspiration to the Catholic Worker Movement and similarly Protestant church leaders during the economic depressions of the 1890's and 1930's were engaged in debates on working conditions and unemployment in Australia. However for the most part churches and their agencies as issues of first order importance do not pursue such issues. **This cannot continue to be the case if we are to preach messages of issues of liberty and equality.** The issues of unemployment and under employment are being more sharply felt, as are issues to do with the nature and or meaning of work in so-called information societies. It is important that we are aware of working conditions whether paid or unpaid but it is also important that work be meaningful as it occupies such an important part of people 's lives. Perhaps the alienation felt by many workers flows as much from the sense that people are not valued for themselves in so many work places and people are not encouraged to see work as at heart vocational . This is true of people working in the caring professions. For those of us of faith who dare to talk about the meaning of life the issue of the meaning of work is unavoidable.

CMN in this study are exploring the tensions in a system that is fundamentally good in its intention but not necessarily so in its execution. The concern of CMN has been fundamentally about the causes of alienation or disorientation at work even to the point of people taking their own lives. It is important at a time when it is only narrow instrumental values that are being promoted that another voice is heard prepared to talk about more fundamental possibilities. This has always been the prophetic challenge but always made most effective when it is addressed in the midst of life and work and where it involves the people most affected.

