



WITNESS STATEMENT OF NICOLE JUNIPER

I, Nicole Juniper, say as follows:

- 1 This statement is about my experience with the mental health system, as a young person and as a young adult. I am currently 22 years old.
- 2 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Early experiences with mental health

- 3 When I was about 13 I first experienced problems with my mental health.
- 4 I lived with my mum and dad, brother and twin sister and home life was good, but school was difficult. The transition into year 7 was hard. I didn't have a strong positive friendship group and I felt isolated and disengaged.
- 5 I was regularly late to class, I spent a lot of time in the school bathroom, and I often skipped classes. I was anxious and I didn't want to be in classrooms with other people. At around the age of 14, I started self-harming. I was a good student, but as my emotions got stronger I could no longer pay attention.
- 6 My teachers referred me to the school's counsellor. The counsellor recognised that I was self-harming. We would talk about it. At some point she explained that she would need to tell my mum about the self-harm.
- 7 I am thankful now for the counsellor's intervention but at the time I found having to reveal my issues awkward and distressing. I didn't want anyone to know about what was occurring I was afraid of being judged and afraid of disappointing my family, who did not know I was struggling. I also didn't think my issues were significant enough to have outside help.
- 8 Getting help
- 9 Around about that time I was referred to Headspace. I don't really know or remember a lot about how this happened at the time, but I believe it was discussed between the school counsellor and my Mum. The school was good and let me have time off to go to appointments.

- 10 At first, I was afraid of going to Headspace. I didn't know what it was, I didn't know anything about mental health and I was afraid of what other people would think of me. Initially, although I attended appointments at Headspace, I didn't want help and so it was difficult for me to engage with the things they were saying. I would often get back to school after appointments or time away and it was strange. People would ask questions. I would often cry, or have my head on my desk at school. I think it was well known that I had been going to get help.
- 11 I started CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) with a psychologist at Headspace. I learned a bit about the process of thinking and how to turn negative thoughts into something more positive. That was some help, but I continued to struggle with depression and I attempted suicide.
- 12 I felt that I didn't want to be around people. I felt uncomfortable about being away from school so often and I was struggling to deal with the workload, so I stopped going. By the time Year 11 started, I had stopped going altogether and dropped out. I spent a year not studying or working.
- 13 In 2013, I was referred to Orygen, a clinic that deals with severe mood and other mental health disorders. I saw a case manager weekly, both a psychologist and a psychiatrist, as well as a vocational worker and a school program worker.
- 14 Getting vocational help was important. The vocational workers helped me find a pathway to university even though I had stopped going to school. I don't know quite how they did it but I understand that they liaised with the university.
- 15 I also joined social groups organised by Orygen. One of them was a horticulture group. We got together and planted flowers. Sometime we went bowling or played laser tag. I felt that I couldn't do those things outside, because I didn't know how to explain myself. But when I got together with the Orygen group I felt I wouldn't need to explain myself. We were all struggling, more or less in the same boat and it was comfortable and reassuring. I could just be myself.
- 16 At Orygen I was able to see my caseworker weekly for 2 years, which made a lot of difference. I could talk about things that happened during the week. Having a continuing relationship with the same case worker was really important. My caseworker really helped me. She actively tried to talk to me just like a normal person. She went out of her way to get to know me and my interests.
- 17 One thing that was challenging was that my psychiatrist would change every six months or so. I saw a lot of faces and a lot of people. Because I was speaking and working with a lot of different people, it involved telling my story lots of times. I found this quite

distressing. I found that I started to tell different people different aspects of my life and I felt that I would disengage with what I was saying, even though it was my own story.

18 I started doing focus groups at Orygen, and later joined their Platform team. I was involved with staff training, interviewing new clinicians, and providing feedback on resources. After doing some media work, I ended up getting into work which involved sharing my story.

19 I could only get a maximum of two years' support from Orygen, so after two years with them, I went back to Headspace. I felt like I still needed more time at Orygen. I had dealt with a lot during my time there.

20 When I went back to Headspace my old case manager from Orygen was there which was wonderful. I knew she had experience with complex disorders and she was very helpful to me. After a while she went on extended leave and I started seeing someone else.

21 When I went back to Headspace I began volunteering and became a member of the Youth Advisory Group. I would go out to events as a headspace representative, attend staff meetings and present in schools about mental health. I eventually started doing some casual paid work there. The work that I did there became very important to me and has given a sense of purpose and being able to contribute. Being able to share my experiences has been very validating and empowering for me. It gave me a voice and the understanding that I could make a difference.

22 I still do a lot of consumer advocacy. I am a peer support worker, group facilitator and I use my lived experience to educate and validate others.

23 After I started working at Headspace I felt that I could not continue to receive treatment there. I didn't feel comfortable in both roles, being both a client and a worker. The work was really valuable for me, so I decided to seek treatment elsewhere.

24 By this time I was 21. I started attending an adult mental health clinic.

25 At the clinic I saw a caseworker infrequently. I didn't feel that the service engaged with me pro-actively and that I had to advocate myself for the care that I needed. Without a positive personal connection like the one I had with my caseworker at Orygen and Headspace, I found it difficult to attend sessions at the clinic and eventually decided that it wasn't really helping to go there. I felt like anytime I needed something it was left up to my case worker, and then never followed up. I was at this clinic for about a year, after which time I was told I would be discharged. I don't know why, as I don't believe there was a limit on my time there.

- 26 Upon discharge from the clinic, it was recommended that I see someone long term and have weekly or fortnightly sessions. I wasn't able to find those options from the services that I could afford.
- 27 I currently see a psychologist at Mind Australia. I don't pay when I go there. I get 10 sessions a year paid for by Medicare. That is not enough for me and I don't think it's enough for many people.
- 28 I am studying nutrition at university and want to work with young people who are at risk of mental health problems. I see my university counsellor when I can, just to get in an extra hour. I find it difficult to keep myself in class if I don't have anyone to tell what's going on, so I use the counsellor to help me stay at university.
- 29 At best, I manage to get about an hour of therapy a month. That's always difficult as a lot happens in a month. By the time I see my therapist, I tell them about all that's happened and then I have almost no time to talk to them to work on skills and work out what to do going forward.
- 30 I am high functioning but I am patching things together. I feel I definitely need more time with a psychologist. It would also make a lot of difference to see the same person consistently.
- 31 I can't afford to pay for additional psychology sessions.

Hospital

- 32 During my time at Orygen, I was admitted to hospital a couple of times.
- 33 For my first admission, a collaborative decision was made by me and my case manager at Orygen that I would spend some time in a psychiatric ward at a children's hospital.
- 34 I was safe there and many nurses caring. Some things were confronting though. People are unwell and you see things you wouldn't expect. One day, someone was having a psychotic episode and was throwing chairs. Nurses and security were running around and we were moved into one room. While I was in the hospital I wasn't allowed to wear short sleeves because I had scars as a result of self-harm. I understand that this may be a trigger for others, but I felt hot and uncomfortable.
- 35 After my initial hospitalisation, I ended up in the emergency department a few times for attempting suicide. I wasn't admitted to the psychiatric ward, however I desperately needed help. I was sent home both times.

- 36 My last hospitalisation was in 2018. I checked myself into ED because I knew that I was struggling. I am able to see when I'm going downhill these days, and intervene before things get bad. I spent 24 hours in emergency while waiting to be transferred to a ward.

Diagnoses

- 37 I am unsure of an exact diagnosis because I've had very persistent problems since I was at least 16. I've been diagnosed with depression and anxiety since then. I am high-functioning; I work and I study, however I still struggle with my emotions.
- 38 At the last clinic I went to (the adult mental health clinic), I said to my case worker that I wasn't sure about my diagnosis and I wanted to discuss it. I then found out that I had been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. I hadn't been told that before this time.
- 39 Finding this out has been difficult for me. I don't know who made the diagnosis, why or when. It surprised me that such a diagnosis had been made – that all of these discussions had been happening behind my own back, yet I'm the person who's getting the care and I'm the person who is most interested in the diagnosis and the discussions. I want to have the opportunity to know, so I can best understand how to access the best services, how to reach out to people with similar issues and so I can do my own research.

Reform

- 40 There is a gap in the system for young people with complex disorders. I went to Orygen but I could only access its services for two years and otherwise had nowhere to go.
- 41 There is so much difficulty getting access to public and free services. I try very hard to get the care I need but find it difficult. In my discharge papers from the last clinic I went to, it said something about me being reliant on services. That was disheartening for me to read. Services are there to be used.
- 42 I can't afford private care. My family have put a lot of time and effort into my care and I want to be independent. I don't want to feel ashamed for needing support.
- 43 There's also difficulty once you do get support. There doesn't seem to be any continuity. I tell my story multiple times and it's distressing for me.
- 44 Young people need to be at the centre of their own care and treatment. They may not always be the ones that have to make a decision but they should be involved. I don't fully understand the decisions that were made around my care growing up, either

because I wasn't told or I don't remember. Being part of the decision-making would have helped me to understand my own care so I could care for myself.

45 I don't think there are enough youth services, but the ones that are around are incredible. I think it's important to get in early before bad things happen –teaching people the skills to cope.

sign here ▶ 

print name Nicole Juniper _____

date 28/06/2019. _____