# Children tortured at Lake Alice and failed by the State – Royal Commission

*15 December 2022*

Tamariki and rangatahi experienced physical, sexual, emotional abuse and torture at the Lake Alice Child and Adolescent Unit, a new report confirms.

Abuse was widespread and unchecked.

Psychiatrist Selwyn Leeks and some of the unit’s staff inflicted extreme physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, degradation and seclusion on the children and young people in their care from 1972 to 1980. The atmosphere in the unit was one of intense fear.

Many at the unit were given electric shocks, often without anaesthetic, to their heads, limbs, torsos and genitals. They were given painful injections of paraldehyde as punishment or as an improper form of aversion therapy, not for legitimate medical reasons.

The use of electric shocks and paraldehyde to punish met the definition of torture as outlined by the Solicitor-General.

Very few of the tamariki and rangatahi admitted to the unit had a valid diagnosis of mental illness that required hospitalisation. There were no proper processes for admission, diagnosis or treatment, and it is likely that many admissions to the unit were unlawful.

These are some of the findings from the first full, independent investigation into events at the Lake Alice Child and Adolescent Unit, highlighted in the Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry’s report *Beautiful Children*, provided to the Governor-General and made public today by the Government.

The report also found that multiple State agencies and professional bodies failed to adequately respond to complaints of abuse and torture at Lake Alice.

“Tamariki and rangatahi have the right to thrive, free from abuse and neglect. The children of Lake Alice were denied that right by the very agencies set up to protect them,” said Inquiry Chair Coral Shaw.

“*Beautiful Children* confirms what survivors have been saying all along – they were abused and tortured at Lake Alice.

“The State failed survivors then, and it has continued to fail them for decades afterwards,” she said.

“This report highlights the key role the State played in such a horrifying and traumatic part of our history and on the lives of the tamariki and rangatahi they were entrusted to protect.

“The story of the Lake Alice child and adolescent unit is a shameful chapter in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand. It must be faced head-on, without excuses or explanations, and with a determination to make proper amends and ensure such tragedies never happen again,” said Shaw.

Those who experienced and witnessed abuse at Lake Alice have suffered lifelong damage to their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. For many, it has affected their ability to create loving relationships, access education and hold down jobs. Its impacts are intergenerational, affecting their parents, siblings, children, mokopuna, and society as a whole.

The report found that racism, ableism and homophobia were widespread at the Unit. These attitudes enabled abuse to occur, and then impeded the inquiries and investigations into the abuse.

Our investigation into the Lake Alice Child and Adolescent Unit will directly inform the findings and recommendations of our final report, due in June 2023.

The report is called *Beautiful Children* from the lyrics of the song *Sensitive to a Smile* by Aotearoa reggae band Herbs. Former band member the late Carl Perkins was one of the tamariki sent to Lake Alice. He credits music for saving his life when he was young. We use the lyrics from *Sensitive to a Smile* in the pages of the case study to honour Carl and all other tamariki and rangatahi sent to Lake Alice.

The full report, *Beautiful Children,* is available on the [Abuse in Care Inquiry’s website](https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/our-progress/reports/te-uiui-o-te-manga-tamariki-me-te-rangatahi-ki-lake-alice).

**About the Inquiry**

The Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry is investigating the abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults within State and faith-based institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand between 1950-1999. We can also learn from the experiences of survivors who have been in care after 1999. The Royal Commission will deliver its final report in June 2023.

**For Media**

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