

**ABUSE IN CARE ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY
LAKE ALICE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT UNIT INQUIRY HEARING**

Under The Inquiries Act 2013

In the matter of The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in State Care and in the Care of Faith-based Institutions

Royal Commission: Judge Coral Shaw (Chair)
Ali'imuamua Sandra Alofivae
Mr Paul Gibson

Counsel: Mr Simon Mount QC, Ms Kerryn Beaton, Mr Andrew Molloy,
Ms Ruth Thomas, Ms Finlayson-Davis, for the Royal
Commission
Ms Karen Feint QC, Ms Julia White and Ms Jane Maltby
for the Crown
Mrs Frances Joychild QC, Ms Alana Thomas and Tracey Hu
for the Survivors
Ms Moira Green for the Citizens Commission on Human
Rights
Ms Susan Hughes QC for Mr Malcolm Burgess and Mr
Lawrence Reid
Mr Michael Heron QC for Dr Janice Wilson
Ms Frances Everard for the New Zealand Human Rights
Commission
Mr Hayden Rattray for Mr Selwyn Leeks
Mr Eric Forster for Victor Soeterik
Mr Lester Cordwell for Mr Brian Stabb and Ms Gloria Barr
Mr Scott Brickell for Denis Hesseltine
Ms Anita Miller for the Medical Council

Venue: Level 2
Abuse in Care Royal Commission of Inquiry
414 Khyber Pass Road
AUCKLAND

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TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

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1 New Zealand. What you have given is a great contribution, is a koha to us all, so thank you
2 John so much, thank you.

3 A. Thank you, kia ora.

4 **CHAIR:** Kia ora. We will now take the adjournment. Thank you again. I hope you get a
5 peaceful afternoon after this.

6 A. Thank you, you too.

7 **Q.** Thank you, bye-bye.

8 **Adjournment from 3.37 pm to 3.59 pm**

9 **CHAIR:** Last witness of the day Ms Thomas.

10 **DEBORAH DICKSON**

11 **MS A THOMAS:** Āe, kua tae tātou ki te kaikōrero whakamutunga mo tēnei ra nei ka mutu mo
12 tēnei wiki. And it is my privilege and honour to introduce the Commissioners to Deborah
13 or Debbie Dickson and her support person here today, Wendy. Nau mai haere mai both of
14 you and thank you for taking the time to come to the hearings today.

15 A. Thank you.

16 **Q.** So like I talked to you about, we'll pass it over to the Chair of our Commission for your
17 affirmation and then we'll start with your statement.

18 A. Yes.

19 **CHAIR:** Hello and welcome. And hello to you Wendy, thank you so much for coming and being
20 here in support. Are you Deb, Deborah or Debbie?

21 A. Just Debbie.

22 **Q.** Debbie?

23 A. Yes.

24 **Q.** That's what you feel comfortable, do you mind if I call you that?

25 A. Yes.

26 **Q.** Don't be so frightened, it's all right. All right, I'm just going to give you the affirmation and
27 I ask you to agree. Do you solemnly, sincerely, truly declare and affirm that the evidence
28 you give to the Commission today will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the
29 truth?

30 A. Yes.

31 **Q.** Thank you.

32 **QUESTIONING BY MS A THOMAS:** Debbie, I know this is stuff that you've only just started
33 talking about recently, so please take your time to go through the statement. Pause any
34 time you need to and just let us know if you need a break, okay?

1 A. [Nods].

2 Q. So if I could take you to paragraph 1, start reading and if there's any mistakes that I may
3 have made, please just correct those while we go. Also I'll just give you options too so you
4 can have a bit of a breath. If you would like Wendy to read some of the sections or if you'd
5 like me to we can do that as well, you just let us know. Wendy? No problem.

6 **SUPPORT PERSON:** "My name is Deborah Dickson, I was born on 29 September 1969. I'm
7 51 year old. I currently live in Palmerston North. I have four daughters and five
8 grandchildren. I am a survivor of Lake Alice. My early life I was born in Marton, I was
9 brought up with my brother who is 16 months older than me. My parents were hard on us.
10 I remember being worked all the time. I'd go to my grandparents' place by the beach in the
11 holidays, that was my get-away.

12 There was never much love from my parents when I was growing up. I don't
13 remember getting hugs or being showed much affection.

14 With my schooling I started off at Marton Primary School and then I went to
15 boarding school when I was 11. In fourth form I was expelled from boarding school and
16 went to Rangitikei College until I was able to get a job. As soon as I had enough money
17 and the means to get out, I left Marton."

18 Q. Before we go on to the next paragraph I just wanted to say at any time you feel you want to
19 take over again, let us know, okay Debbie?

20 A. [Nods].

21 Q. Paragraph 5.

22 **SUPPORT PERSON:** "When I was two and a half years old I was admitted to Palmerston North
23 Hospital with meningitis. My parents were told that I had only hours to live. They were
24 given a choice, I could be given antibiotics that could potentially result in me having a
25 feeble mind later in life. If I didn't get the treatment I would die. They chose to give me
26 the treatment and I made a full recovery.

27 However, for the rest of my childhood they treated me like I had brain damage or
28 some sort of mental disorder. This was despite the doctors telling them that I hadn't
29 suffered any effects and that any behavioural issues were from my home environment.

30 Two weeks before I went away to Lake Alice, my parents sent me to a health camp
31 for my behavioural issues, such as tantrums. I was 9. I stayed there for two weeks before I
32 was admitted to Lake Alice.

33 I believe my parents had already made up their minds to send me to Lake Alice
34 because they just wanted me out of the house. They never told me why I was going there.

1 I was only 9 and believed I was just being a young kid. Yes, I was naughty sometimes but I
2 was just acting out. I didn't have mental health issues that required me to be locked up.

3 I was admitted to Lake Alice on 12 September 1978. My psych report says it was
4 because of unmanageable behaviour at home and behavioural disorder. My parents signed
5 a form agreeing for me to go there and receive treatment including ECT and whatever
6 drugs they chose to give me. I was put in villa 6. I was placed on a pre-discharge trial leave
7 on 10 November 1978 after spending two months there. I was pretty much a good girl the
8 whole time.

9 When I was at primary school, I was a good kid and got along well with my
10 classmates and the teaching staff. My teachers were surprised when they heard that I had
11 been admitted to Lake Alice."

12 A. What I remember about Lake Alice. I was only 9 years old when I went to Lake Alice so I
13 don't remember a lot of the detail but the things I do remember are very clear in my head
14 and will never be forgotten.

15 The understanding my parents had with Lake Alice was that I would go there
16 Monday to Friday as an inpatient and then return to my parents in the weekends. We lived
17 so close to Lake Alice that I would sometimes go back home for dinner on Wednesday
18 night. I put up a fight every time my parents sent me back there. I just didn't know why I
19 was being put in that place.

20 My mum would tell me that I hadn't changed, that I was still being naughty. Then
21 I would go back and they would up my dosage of medications.

22 When I first went to Lake Alice, I did not see any doctors and there were no
23 assessments or tests done on me.

24 I remember the bedroom that I stayed in. I was all by myself. As you walked
25 down the corridor it was a room on the left, it just had one bed, no toilet. As an adult
26 looking back it reminds me of a prison cell. They would lock me in at night. I remember
27 feeling so scared when the lights went off and the doors were closed for the evening.

28 I remember the main common area where we would play. I was in the teen
29 adolescent unit so most of the kids were much older than me. I was the youngest there.
30 I actually don't remember any of the staff because I couldn't distinguish the adults from the
31 teenagers, I was too young to really know.

32 We had a school that we would go to but I don't remember any of the schoolwork
33 that we did, if we did any. Everyone just kept to themselves and I don't even know what
34 we did all day, I was just trying get through the day until I could leave Lake Alice for good.

1 One of my most vivid memories was movie nights. We would have them in the
2 big gym where all the patients would watch the movie. This was everyone, kids and adults
3 mixed altogether. I was so terrified on those nights because some of the adults that they
4 brought to hang out with us were pretty scary. They would scream and scream the whole
5 time. As an adult now, I know that a lot of them were mentally insane.

6 The bathroom was horrible. There was just one bathtub we all had to wash in. It
7 was raised above the ground and I remember it being very open and feeling like anyone
8 could come and see me having a wash any time they wanted. The actual bath time was
9 horrible too. The staff would just dunk you in very forcefully like I was a prisoner and
10 wash my hair like I had lice, but I didn't. I felt like we were in a concentration camp. The
11 actual water stank, stunk, ponged. I don't know what they put in the water. They didn't tell
12 us, and you certainly didn't ask.

13 I remember thinking I was brought up to respect adults so surely, they were doing
14 what was good for me, and so I didn't resist them. But at the same time, they were treating
15 us like we were dogs or something. I couldn't do anything. I was only 9, so I just did what
16 I was told.

17 I remember lining up and going past a hole in the wall and you were given a little
18 cup, and one night I fought against it, and I was taken to my room and the door was locked
19 and I was left alone. It felt like ages. I don't think I ate anything that whole night.

20 No-one came and saw me while I was in Lake Alice. I know it was because of the
21 shame that the Lake Alice name had. Our whole community knew about Lake Alice and if
22 you went there you were crazy. So even though my parents put me in there, they were
23 embarrassed that I was there. They didn't tell my grandparents or my cousins. They told
24 no-one that I was in Lake Alice and so no-one came to see me. Once I got out of Lake
25 Alice, I didn't tell anyone either because of the stigma. I was ashamed. As soon as people
26 found out that I went there, they behaved as though I was mentally ill, so I just kept it a
27 secret.

28 Can Wendy read 23 please?

29 **SUPPORT PERSON:** "My nurse's notes say I suffered from sexual manipulation/interference by
30 one of the other lady inmates. I don't remember this happening to me. I think I have
31 blocked it out. Reading the reports from the doctors and the nurses makes me sick. How
32 could they do nothing about it? Simply sending me to the doctor for a check and noting
33 there was no physical harm is not enough. There was no follow-up to see if I was okay
34 after being sexually abused and as far as the notes are concerned, nothing happened to her.

1 Like I said, I've clearly blocked it out and I guess that's for the better."

2 A. Even though it says throughout my notes that I was a good behaved girl and easy to look
3 after, and recommended that I be discharged as soon as possible, they still pumped me with
4 drugs. My notes say I was given Largactil --

5 Q. You don't have to name all those names if you don't want to Debbie, that's okay.

6 A. Thank you -- all while I was at Lake Alice.

7 **CHAIR:** Just for the record, there were four pretty powerful drugs that you were given during that
8 time.

9 A. Yeah, each outpatient appointment it just -- the doses just got up and up and up each
10 outpatient appointment. So yeah, start little and just keep giving you more and more.

11 Q. They started small and got larger and larger as time went on?

12 A. Yeah, yeah.

13 After Lake Alice. When I was discharged in November 1978 I was an outpatient
14 for about 15 months. I would go back to Lake Alice with my mother now and then to be
15 checked and to be kept on my medication. So I don't remember finally leaving Lake Alice,
16 I just stopped going back there one day.

17 I remember going to boarding school in about 1980, 81 and not going back to
18 Lake Alice. I remember running away a lot at boarding school too.

19 I had a shitty adulthood following Lake Alice. I am a loner and I hate socialising.
20 My confidence is so low if I get into trouble I can't manage it and break down. I can't
21 manage the criticism. So it has really affected the relationships I have made and it has
22 ruined my life.

23 This is the first I have felt strong enough to even address that I went to Lake Alice.
24 I had heard about the Grant Cameron proceedings but I wasn't ready then to talk about
25 anything, and I remember thinking that Dr Leeks wasn't there when I went so they wouldn't
26 want to talk to me, so I just didn't brother.

27 I decided to tell my girls what happened to me when I decided to take part in the
28 Royal Commission. That was a huge step for me and has affected my children in many
29 different ways.

30 The effects of Lake Alice and State care on my life. My eldest grandchild is 15
31 now and I have another four grandchildren. So I've got five granddaughters all in total.
32 When I turn up on my motorbike they run out and give me cuddles and want me to love
33 them. We show each other love as much as we can and are able to. I made a promise to
34 myself that I would make the choice to change and break the cycle of the environment that

1 I was exposed to as a young child.

2 We need to shower love on our children so that the abuse cycle doesn't continue.
3 This is something that did not happen when I was little and it only continued at Lake Alice.

4 Like I said above, I have struggled a lot with relationships I have had since Lake
5 Alice. I do not have any trust in authority. I just want to keep to myself and not expose
6 myself to any hurt. This lack of trust in anybody has led to many relationship breakdowns.
7 I was married for nearly three years but it didn't work out as I was looking for acceptance
8 and love everywhere but I couldn't open up to believe in myself or the relationship I was in.

9 Not only in my marriage but any relationship I have with family or with friends.
10 I generally feel that if I don't get too close then I won't have to be accountable or
11 answerable to anyone and they won't get to know who I really am. I don't want anyone to
12 support me or believe in me in case I let them down. I feel more comfortable just keeping
13 to myself.

14 The stigma over the years that came from being in Lake Alice has been a continual
15 burden. Everyone in the area I grew up in knew that Lake Alice was a place you went if
16 you were crazy. This is what I had to fight every day trying to prove that I wasn't crazy and
17 sometimes it would make me feel crazy. One of my employers would find out -- once my
18 employers would find out that I had been to Lake Alice, they would start to treat me
19 differently. As an example, I was working in a rest home when an incident happened
20 between myself and another staff member. Without even trying to understand the issue my
21 boss just blamed me and told me I needed to get counselling. I didn't do anything wrong,
22 but they didn't even want to hear me out.

23 I don't talk about feelings, I bottle up and don't express anything at all. If I'd
24 expressed my feelings in Lake Alice they would have thought I was actually crazy so
25 I learned not to show my feelings.

26 I tried to kill myself a few times when I was younger. These were serious
27 attempts. Even to the this day I have very down days and battle depression and the feeling
28 of wanting to end my life. The only thing that keeps me from actually doing it are my
29 children and grandchildren and I could never do that to my girls. They see me as strong
30 and independent and I need to be that person for them. I try every day.

31 I feel extremely out of place in social situations. I always feel like I'm always
32 intruding in situations that I'm not supposed to be in. I avoid work functions and
33 socialising. I think this stems from Lake Alice and being forced to isolate to keep safe. I
34 don't know where I belong.

1 What I want from the Royal Commission. I am past counselling. I have just
2 gotten over it myself so I don't think I want that, but you never know after the hearings.
3 I might need someone to talk to.

4 What I would like to see. An apology. I'd like to see the doctors and psychiatrists
5 held accountable. I want people to know what happened and I want people to learn from
6 what happened to us at Lake Alice so it never happens again.

7 I want our voice to be heard. We need to be finally given the voice to speak up.
8 This didn't happen when we were 9 or 12, 16 or 21, but it needs to happen now.

9 I want compensation for the suffering we have been put through as children who
10 went through Lake Alice.

11 I wish to present my evidence to the Royal Commission so my voice can be heard.

12 **QUESTIONING BY MS A THOMAS CONTINUED:** Thank you Debbie. I just want to say
13 that I know you stayed silent for a long time and the decision you made to actually present
14 evidence in the Royal Commission was a huge step for you, so thank you and furthermore,
15 that you chose at the last minute not to be anonymous so that people could hear your story
16 and they have heard that. So did you have one last something that you wanted to close
17 with?

18 A. Yes, I do, if I may. I feel sad, heart broken and angry for everybody, including myself.
19 I feel like I always have to prove myself and I'm not worthy and always looking for
20 acceptance. I feel like a fraud after hearing what others went through. I feel sorry for them
21 as what I went through was by no means as horrific as what these people have gone
22 through.

23 I guess some could say I was lucky that I did come from the normal two parent,
24 two children family home life, and even though at the time I did not think I had a voice, we
25 all now have a voice that needs to be heard. Whether we were wards of the State or from
26 the normal Kiwi family.

27 It has been 42 years, it is now my time. I am so pleased that the children of
28 the 90s, the present era and the future have a voice and they know that they will be able to
29 use it and will be heard.

30 **Q.** Thank you Debbie. The Commissioners might have some questions for you.

31 **COMMISSIONER GIBSON:** No questions, but thank you so much for how clearly you
32 articulate the need to use your voice and it is your time. Thank you.

33 A. Thank you.

34 **COMMISSIONER ALOFIVAE:** No questions, Debbie, just wanted to thank you for your

- 1 enormous courage, thank you.
- 2 A. Thank you.
- 3 **CHAIR:** I've just got one little question, and that's where you stayed when you were in Lake
4 Alice. You referred to it as a small bedroom or you said cell.
- 5 A. Yeah.
- 6 **Q.** Did you sleep in that room all the time?
- 7 A. Yeah.
- 8 **Q.** So you weren't in a dormitory?
- 9 A. No, no.
- 10 **Q.** Were other children in these small rooms as well or were others in dormitories?
- 11 A. I don't believe there were dormitories there, it was the corridor and there's rooms either side
12 going down.
- 13 **Q.** So everybody had a room of their own?
- 14 A. Of their own, yeah.
- 15 **Q.** Okay. All right.
- 16 A. I would assume, so the door was locked at night, so --
- 17 **Q.** So you're locked into that room at night?
- 18 A. Yes.
- 19 **Q.** And what time were you let out in the morning?
- 20 A. I don't know, I've got a lot of notes from my stay.
- 21 **Q.** Yes, it doesn't really matter. But if you wanted to go to the toilet at night, what would you
22 do?
- 23 A. You wouldn't go, you waited until you got unlocked in the morning and I do remember,
24 because bed wetting was quite bad for a lot of people.
- 25 **Q.** Very common for the poor children who were there?
- 26 A. Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 27 **Q.** It's tough isn't it.
- 28 A. Yes, yes.
- 29 **Q.** And coming here today I know has been very tough for you and it's remarkable to me that
30 you have had the courage to do it, it really is extraordinary. I mean I can see you're shy, I
31 can see you've told us yourself you don't like to socialise, and yet you've taken the
32 extraordinary step of speaking out in front of the whole country who's wanting to watch and
33 speaking your truth.
- 34 A. Yes.

1 **Q.** So I want to say one thing, please don't think you're a fraud. We know you are not a fraud.
2 You are speaking about a dreadful time for you and for all the other children who were
3 there, whether they got ECT or not, you were heavily medicated without any medical
4 reason whatsoever. That's a shocking state of affairs that we have heard very carefully.

5 **A.** Yes.

6 **Q.** So don't think you're a fraud, please.

7 **A.** Thank you.

8 **Q.** And the only other thing I want to say is I know you don't -- you're a bit suspicious about
9 counselling, but you know, and sitting right there beside you, is a very capable and willing
10 people to support you, because this is going to have an impact on you coming today I'm
11 sure.

12 **A.** Yes.

13 **Q.** So take advantage of all the support you can lay your hands on, all right?

14 **A.** Yes, thank you, thank you very much.

15 **Q.** Many thanks indeed and Wendy, thank you very much, you've played a very important role
16 in helping Debbie tell her story. Thank you.

17 **SUPPORT PERSON:** Thank you.

18 **CHAIR:** So kua mutu aku mahi i tēnei wiki.

19 **MS A THOMAS:** Ma'am, sorry, if I could have one very boring housekeeping before the karakia.
20 Mo taku hē Temepara. Just so the Commissioners are aware, I have another hearing next
21 week down in Poneke, so seeking leave from the Commissioners not to be here on Monday
22 and Tuesday but will be back on Wednesday.

23 **CHAIR:** You'll be sadly missed, Ms Thomas, but of course, you hardly need to seek leave, thank
24 you for the courtesy.

25 **Hearing closes with waiata and karakia mutunga by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei**

26 **Hearing adjourned at 4.25 pm to Monday, 21 June 2021 at 10 am**

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