

We've come a long way

13 July 2016

This week the Royal Commission has commenced a case study into residential care for children with disabilities. The Sisters of the Good Samaritan Mater Dei School has been part of the study.

Without wishing to take anything away from the actual cases themselves I thought it was important to reflect on what a difference time has made to the handling of child sexual abuse cases.

Throughout the Royal Commission hearings we have been shocked and confronted by the way institutions have either bungled the handling or deliberately covered up the abuse that occurred. Sometimes it begged belief.

Even the most strident critics would concede that these days the vigilance and hyper sensitivity to issues of child sexual abuse are light years in front of the mindsets of yesteryear. Government regulations are far tighter, reporting requirements are stricter and prevention strategies are now commonplace.

When I listened to the evidence of Mater Dei's principal, Tony FitzGerald, I heard an extremely dedicated professional, with an obvious commitment to children with a disability, calmly and clearly outline policies and procedures that the school has in place to ensure safeguarding of the students.

And while we will need to wait for the Royal Commission to deliver its final report into this case study to fully understand what happened at the school at the time of the abuse and since, the evidence from Mr Fitzgerald was impressive and again demonstrated just how far the Catholic school system has come from the days when children were abused by deceitful and manipulative clerics and others.

Such was the strength of his evidence that I thought it also demonstrated the degree to which school staff, through their leadership groups, are prepared to go to give their local communities and parent bodies the confidence in the safeguarding of their children.

We know that there are the regular in-service training for staff and the continual awareness raising amongst the children themselves about 'stranger danger' and its modern equivalents. We also know that staff are trained to be alert to any signs that a child may be at risk or even worse.

And it is important to note that some children may well be at risk in domestic situations. Unfortunately that is where the majority of child abuse occurs. Having trained staff in schools who are able to detect the signs of abuse can be a very important safety net in the welfare of children in general.

None of us are in the business of rationalising the past and the horrors that have occurred. Neither are we seeking to contextualise the mishandling and cover ups.

The said, pointing to the massive changes that have occurred is important. The community needs confidence and hope and we need to affirm the areas in which real, effective change is happening.

We need to encourage those who are 'pushing the envelope' to make institutions safer, smarter and to become places where the littlest and most fragile voices are heard and heeded.

This is part of today's story and it is an integral component to the national witness this Royal Commission seeks to deliver.

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