

Female-only psychiatric units to lift patient safety

Kate Hagan *September 9, 2011*



Patient advocate Sue Armstrong. *Photo: Rodger Cummins*

A NEW female-only psychiatric unit at The Alfred hospital has been welcomed as a step towards improving safety for mentally ill women across Victoria following complaints of harassment and sexual assault by male patients.

Mental Health Minister Mary Wooldridge said guidelines would be provided to hospitals within weeks for applications to a \$4 million fund, promised during last year's election campaign, to create female-only areas in existing psychiatric wards.

She said women were too often subjected to abuse in what should be a safe environment, and the new five-bed Alfred unit with its own living area and courtyard was an example of changes that could be made at other hospitals.

A survey by the Victorian Women and Mental Health Network has revealed that 61 per cent of women experienced some form of abuse in psychiatric wards, including harassment, sexual assault and rape.

Network spokeswoman Anne Holland said her group had been lobbying for years for the changes and was keen to see segregated wards created statewide.

"This is the beginning of the race but at least we're getting off the starting blocks," she said.

"It's about creating an environment where people can know that just because they are unwell, they're not going to end up in a sexual relationship that they haven't really been able to make a good decision about."

Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre director Jayashri Kulkarni said single-sex wards had worked well to decrease sexual assaults in the UK following their introduction five years ago.

She said part of the problem was that sexual disinhibition could be a feature of mental illness in a patient population that was generally young and active.

Patient advocate Sue Armstrong, who has been hospitalised three times after being diagnosed with manic depression 20 years ago, said she was determined to see female-only psychiatric wards across Victoria after hearing from many women who had been sexually harassed and assaulted by male patients.

Ms Armstrong said she had been hassled by male patients, a problem that was compounded for other women who were sexually disinhibited and needed a safe space.

Alfred hospital director of psychiatry Simon Stafrace said the opening of the new unit came as the community's confidence in the mental health system had been tested this week by a series of reports in *The Age* detailing deaths in psychiatric wards.

He said the hospital wanted to engage in honest debate about the challenges of treating acute mental illness, but "enormous strides" had been made over the past 25 years to improve the accountability and quality of psychiatric care.

"There is still much to do. Typically patients with acute psychiatric illness suffer greatly, [have] complex problems and present enormous dilemmas to families and the wider community," he said. "The work is difficult and can only be done in partnership with consumers, their families, the community and [health] department