

PRESS STATEMENT

Durban and Coastal Mental Health (DCMH) is a registered not for profit, non-governmental mental health organisation which was established 77 years ago. In addition to our Social Work Services, DCMH runs 7 residential care centres for persons with mental disabilities, 7 day care centres for children with profound and severe intellectual disability, 8 training workshops offering protective employment and psychosocial rehabilitation for adults with mental disabilities and other support to mental healthcare users and their families within the greater Durban and Coastal Area, reaching out to more than 80 000 beneficiaries in the last financial year.

The Organisation has recently found itself at the epicentre of a slew of allegations surrounding claims of abuse and negligence taking place within its facilities, coincidentally at a time when we have a few disgruntled employees, some of whom have very recently been the subject of disciplinary proceedings.

We are concerned that selective, untrue and /or distorted information that is being provided by whomsoever to the SABC is being done so with a malicious and vindictive intent and further that the SABC, in the interest of ensuring fair play and balanced and accurate reporting has not given DCMH sufficient time and opportunity to investigate and respond to the allegations. We are also concerned that the SABC, both in conducting its investigations and reporting thereon, has at times acted unethically and outside the bounds of respect for the rights of persons with mental disabilities and seems to have embarked on a deliberate attempt, at times bordering on sensationalism, to discredit the good name and reputation of DCMH, irrespective of the negative consequences this could have on our funding streams, both governmental and private, and the impact this could have on the services we provide to the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our community.

In light of this, the Governing Board, Executive Director and Management of DCMH would like to correct the inaccurate information aired by SABC television channels and in online publications, highlight the negative impact this has had on the beneficiaries of the services the Organisation provides, table their concerns regarding the manner in which the Organisation is being treated and outline the potential harm to the Organisation as a result of the irresponsible reporting. The allegations are false and associated incidents are being thoroughly investigated by DCMH through an approved procedure.

For the record, we have consistently strived to provide quality care and support to our service users and every misdemeanour or allegation that is brought to or comes to our attention is investigated thoroughly and dealt with appropriately. Where necessary disciplinary and other steps have been taken where there have been transgressions.

The Government departments that provide funding as well as private donors regularly conduct audits, as appropriate, on the services provided by DCMH.

On the 2nd of July 2018, a journalist from the SABC contacted our Organisation by telephone and stated that he required us to commit to an interview on the said date in respect of the allegations of sexual abuse of 2 persons with disabilities. We responded advising that both the matters are still under investigation,

however, we were told that if we did not accede to an interview, our right to reply would have been accorded, and the story would be broadcast on TV on the said date. No questions were sent to us to respond. On account of the pressure put on the Organization, we sent a statement via email and requested that our written response be quoted if they intended reporting on the matter. Another member of the SABC, who appears to be the first journalist's supervisor, also held a telephonic discussion with us and informed us that the source of the allegations would not be revealed. We attempted to explain that we could not be interviewed as we cannot discuss details of our clients, without their and / or their family's consent as it would be in breach of confidentiality but to no avail. The names of both the first journalist and his supervisor will be provided if the need arises.

We were also informed by the second journalist that they had received a number of allegations against DCMH, which would keep us busy for at least the next week. We requested in writing that the SABC make these allegations available to us for further investigation internally and to thereafter enable us to respond properly to each of the allegations. To date this full list of allegations has not been provided to DCMH. Instead we were bombarded for the better part of last week on a daily basis with one allegation at a time and given unrealistic time frames to respond, with the threat that if we failed to respond, SABC would nonetheless go ahead with publication.

Being an NGO, with limited financial resources, we do not have the means to use legal remedies against the SABC and therefore appeal to the SABC to internalise the negative impact that could be caused as a result of the manner in which they have been dealing with these so called allegations, ensure fair play, avoid sensationalising matters and give DCMH reasonable and adequate opportunity to respond to some person/s calculated and destructive agenda, so that the most marginalised and vulnerable members of our society do not bear the brunt of, and suffer the consequences of the types of actions that have ensued.

The allegations were that there were 3 incidents of alleged sexual abuse in respect to one Resident with mental disabilities. DCMH had been appraised of these allegations and had interrogated them fully from 2016 to 2018. In the first incident which was reported in 2016 and third incident in 2018, there was no evidence of sexual abuse whatsoever. In the second incident in 2017, there was evidence of abuse but the victim pointed out the alleged perpetrator who is also a person with mental disabilities, the actual perpetrator was not conclusive. In the first and third incidents, the alleged perpetrator was moved to another cottage at the facility. The matter was reported to SAPS and we were telephonically informed that the matter would not be pursued by SAPS and the matter was closed. The family reported the matter to the Commission for Gender Equality and after analysing a report and consulting with the family, the matter was closed. Lifeskills and education was undertaken with the residents. There is a record of continuous interventions by the staff and management from 2016 to date and constant supervision of residents by staff. There were also allegations surrounding possible abuse by the staff and erroneous statements made for instance, that it is a good thing to suffer from AIDS. We categorically state that these are untrue. Our submission is that should the alleged victim's family (who were interviewed by the media) have been that concerned about his safety, then surely, they would have approached DCMH to have the victim removed from the facility.

In the second matter of alleged sexual abuse, the family did not contact the media the family stated firmly that the journalist visited them at their home and that they are the ones who were contacted by the journalist. The family actually contacted a social worker at our offices to enquire as to whether she had given the Media their details. The family member who was contacted, in fact, informed the reporters concerned that the matter was being investigated by DCMH and that they were satisfied with the care and services of DCMH. They indicated that they were not prepared to be used as an example in the media's report. Again, it appears that personal information of a Mental Health Care User and their family has been compromised which violates their Rights to confidentiality. We wish to place on record that the alleged sexual abuse matter did not take place on DCMH's premises.

A further allegation was made against DCMH on the 4th of July where an email was received by the Executive Director complaining about residents being utilised as security guards at our centres. Questions were posed as to how much these residents were being paid. We informed the journalist that gatekeeping is utilised as a means of economic integration and that this is in line with our Psychosocial Skills and Job Grading Programme for persons with intellectual disability and for persons with psychiatric illness. Our mental healthcare users participate in these activities with support from the staff. This process provides for the ultimate objective of economic integration of the mental health care users- providing for growth and development according to their individual needs and potential maximising their potential for economic integration. Various skills development opportunities are provided including vehicle cleaning, dispatch, reception duties, laundry, maintenance and carer assistance. These skills groom service users to gain confidence and optimise their potential. This improves their level of functionality and independence and positive changes are observed in their self-esteem, self-worth and interpersonal relationships. The service users receive a stipend for their services and the programmes are not full-day.

Service users were asked for comment when journalists appeared on the other side of the fence of certain of our facilities. They proceeded to question the service users. The service users did not know who the journalists were or that they were going to appear on television. They did not know why the questions were asked or that they would appear in national media. Their consent was therefore not granted, and they found themselves unsettled by the interviews. This is a gross and unacceptable violation of the rights of our Service Users.

On the 5th of July 2018, an email was sent to DCMH containing further allegations, this time that a staff member had assaulted a resident with a claim that the resident concerned had lost her eye as a consequence of this incident. This incident happened over 16 months ago, and following a thorough investigation, the responsible staff member was disciplined and dismissed. Continuous support was provided to the victim and other members of staff. Measures are always put in place to protect residents and we strongly condemned this incident. We cannot comment on whether the victim had lost all sight in one eye. There was immediate intervention on our part and we have no control over the justice system and thus could do nothing when the former staff member was not prosecuted, although the incident was reported to the Police.

The Mental Health Review Board visited our facilities on the 5th of July 2018 and they were satisfied with all of our interventions for the 2nd and 3rd of July. We take every allegation seriously and always endeavour

to investigate to the fullest extent possible. We have a 24-hour reporting period of complaints and every allegation is attended to speedily and monitored. Every measure is taken to minimise risk and to ensure protection of our Service Users in the organisation.

A further allegation by the SABC concerns a mental health care user who died at one of our centres. This incident happened 15 months ago. The patient was a known epileptic who had a seizure and ultimately passed away. DCMH has been accused of negligence in this regard, a further allegation which we refute. The patient received his medication timeously and his death was reported as being one of natural causes. His body was discovered early that morning, despite him seemingly being stable hours before. Support was provided to the family of the patient who expressed gratitude in this regard. Again, all proper procedure was followed. There was no prior evidence that the patient's condition was not adequately controlled.

The impact we have experienced from the recent relentless reporting on these incidents is reputational damage which could result in a loss of funding from Government and reduction or closure of services to vulnerable people with psychiatric illnesses and intellectual disabilities. It is necessary at this juncture to enquire whether the reporting concerned was responsible or not. In our view this was wholly not the case. Assumptions were made, mental healthcare users were interviewed without consent, family members were not informed, and reasonable time was not afforded to DCMH to adequately respond. It is with grave disappointment that we have suffered at the hands of journalistic exploitation and innocent Service Users could suffer as a result. We hope that our Organisation will recover from the harm done to us over the past week or so, but our good name has needlessly been tarnished.

We again reiterate that we believe the source of information being provided to journalists appears to be from a small group of disgruntled employees who have an axe to grind with the Organisation. We believe the SABC has focused on selective, and distorted information being provided to it, much of which does not accurately reflect the truth, and is acting irresponsibly behind the cloak of "press freedom", without proper regard to the negative consequences and the impact this could have on the services that DCMH provides to the most marginalised and vulnerable members of our Society. The Board of DCMH is satisfied that while there have been isolated incidents concerning its Service Users, it is satisfied that the management of the Organisation has correctly and properly investigated each incident diligently, and where applicable, taken the appropriate and necessary actions.



Dr L.R. Naidoo

Chairman of the Governing Board

On behalf of the Members of the Governing Board of Durban and Coastal Mental Health

12th July 2018