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Ombudsman report on the deaths of people with disabilities in care

The NSW Ombudsman, Bruce Barbour, today tabled in Parliament volume one of his report of reviewable deaths.

This volume concerns the deaths in 2006 of 98 people with disabilities who lived in the care of disability services or licensed boarding houses. They included:

- 42 people who lived in accommodation provided by the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC)
- 40 people who lived in non-government accommodation funded by DADHC
- 16 people who lived in licensed boarding houses

The Ombudsman's office is one of very few agencies in the world with the responsibility of reviewing the deaths of people with disabilities in care, and 2007 marks the fifth year of this work.

“The people whose deaths we review are highly vulnerable, and heavily dependent on disability and other services for their day-to-day care,” said the Ombudsman, Mr Barbour. **“Over the five years we have noted the work DADHC and NSW Health have undertaken to improve their response to the needs of people with disabilities. However, we continue to identify concerns.”**

The Ombudsman's report notes that:

- Some deaths may be prevented if more effective systems are put in place to identify and manage risks, such as those faced by people with disabilities who are susceptible to falls or who have difficulty swallowing.
- Some of the people who had lived in large residential centres (institutions) had little contact with the community. The reviews showed that some people rarely left the service grounds more than once a month, and some people had

not had any access to the community in at least the 12 months before they died.

- Although many of the people who died had repeated contact with hospitals and faced increasing risks related to their health conditions, the reviews found that hospitals did not consistently undertake assessments to determine whether the individuals could be safely discharged home.
- For the third consecutive year, the reviews identified concerns about the first aid response of some disability services to health emergencies affecting the people in their care, including delays in commencing CPR.

“We have consistently raised concerns about the first aid response of support staff to health emergencies faced by the people in their care. Yet, there are currently no mandatory requirements for support workers in funded services to have first aid qualifications,” said Mr Barbour. **“Given the vulnerability of people with disabilities in care, we consider this to be unacceptable.”**

The Ombudsman has directed eight recommendations to NSW Health and to DADHC.

“We will closely monitor the progress agencies make in addressing the issues raised by our work,” Mr Barbour said. **“This report emphasises the need for significant and sustained work on the part of DADHC, NSW Health, and non-government services to ensure that people with disabilities in care receive the support and services that they need, when they need them.”**

Copies of the Ombudsman’s report are available at: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

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