



# Without Due Care

By Therese Mackay

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This is the story of **Donald William Mackay [1950-2007]** – a quadriplegic man's shocking medical abuse and death at the hands of the diseased and unaccountable Australian health care system.

"My husband, Don Mackay, died because of what was done to him in a major Sydney teaching hospital: a wrong and totally unnecessary operation; a lung mistakenly suctioned for 22 hours at 10 times the correct rate; severe MRSA infection inside his lungs; deadly pneumonia and sepsis, which developed during the 36 days he spent there."

## Early years

In 1972 Therese met her future husband Don. They were drawn to each other, sharing the same strong values and healthy upbringing. Their two girls were born and in 1976 they moved to Port Macquarie, New South Wales. In January 1982, life changed. Don broke his neck. The specialist told Don that his spinal cord was severed and he would be a quadriplegic for the rest of his life.

## Early action

Therese and Don lobbied the local council in the 1980s for better wheelchair access and struck a deal with them that they would go halves in the cost of construction of wheelchair access at major points around the city centre. Together this struggle led them to a growing awareness that the actions of governments and the bureaucracy are not always in the best interests of the population. It was a steep learning curve.

When the privatisation of the local Port Macquarie Base Hospital was threatened in late 1991, they worked tirelessly for years until the hospital was finally returned to public hands in 2004. It was an all consuming and bitterly fought battle. But it honed skills which Therese would need in her struggle for justice for her husband after his death in 2007 which, ironically, was brought about by the very system he fought so hard to maintain.

## Hospital treatment

The hundreds of errors and the numerous instances of lack of caring are only those she witnessed or discovered during the 12 hours she was with Don each day for five nightmarish weeks. "Common sense tells me many more must have occurred while I wasn't there," Therese noted.

Knowing the grievous impact on Don of the errors made, senior doctors at the **Royal North Shore Hospital**, St Leonards, Sydney, effectively imposed a blanket ban on any information and every aspect of Don's condition and treatment. Though this may seem an extremely unlikely way for staff of a major hospital to behave, particularly with patients' rights so well defined these days, it is true. Such morally unacceptable conduct needs to be fully exposed so as to end what appears to have become standard practice within this particular, once highly renowned, Australian hospital.

"My husband Don's awful suffering was an abuse of his human rights. Had he been an animal, those responsible would have been prosecuted. As it was, no one was ever made accountable," said Therese in disgust.

## **Regulatory failure**

The medical profession with an apparently acceptable level of medical negligence, aided by a sloppy bureaucracy and inefficient Health Ministers and Premiers, covered up what was done to Don. Their investigative arm, the Health Care Complaints Commission, claimed that all medical treatment rendered to Don was apparently acceptable. This needs independent investigation for there has been none.

## **NSW Ministry of Health's sensibilities irked**

When the book was launched in October 2010, the NSW Ministry of Health's Northern Sydney Central Coast Health, took the extraordinary step of releasing a Media Statement. Clearly they were peeved at the meticulous detail of the systemic breakdown of their own health system which led to five weeks of suffering and the subsequent death of quadriplegic Donald William Mackay three years before.

Therese Mackay responded to the Northern Sydney Central Coast Health CEO Matthew Daly:

"I would have expected your people to, at the very least, address the multitude areas of failure of the health system — not go to some length to try to undermine my credibility. All your people had to offer in their attempt to discredit me was a perceived unwillingness to meet with your people all because I would not agree to confidentiality conciliation in any area concerning Don's brutal treatment and unnecessary death."

The book was written hopefully to raise awareness and be used as a teaching tool by health authorities. As you can judge by the audacious NSW Ministry of Health's Media Statement, it prefers to spin its lies and remain disinterested in fixing a sick system it oversees.

Help ensure that not one more person is condemned to have their life ended in such a brutal manner. The medical profession must become accountable for their actions and Governments must act to enforce this. This can only happen when ordinary people demand change. Governments do not act, they react.

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