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Witnesses tell shocking tales about Guardian

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By BEN HILLS

Horror stories of medical maltreatment of people in the care of the NSW guardianship authorities, including the alleged euthanasia of an elderly woman against the wishes of her family, were recounted to a parliamentary committee yesterday.

Witnesses wept as they gave evidence of officials of the Public Guardian's office confiscating the assets of their relatives and putting them in hospitals and nursing homes where they were prevented from seeing their families and subjected to massive doses of psychotropic drugs.

More than 100 friends and families of people subject to guardianship orders packed the theatrette at Parliament House for an unusual public forum chaired by Swansea MP Mr Milton Orkopoulos, applauding as witnesses denounced the decisions and policies of the guardianship bureaucracy.

The most dramatic testimony came from a Sydney woman, Frances Cookson, who said that her previously alert and active mother had been allowed to die of "thirst and starvation" after the Guardianship Tribunal intervened in a family dispute over her care, and hospitalised her, where she was incorrectly diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease and given powerful drugs.

Brandishing pictures of her emaciated-looking mother, Ms Cookson alleged that "a decision was made to terminate my mother by denying her food and water" by medical staff "in the Fairfield area" who had access to a book on euthanasia called *Playing God*. Her mother died in March 1995, only a matter of months after being placed under guardianship.

As Mr Orkopoulos appealed for order, telling the audience that "this is a committee of Parliament, not *60 Minutes*", Ms Cookson warned the guardianship officials: "Murder has no time limit."

Another witness, Meryl Gordon, said her 84-year-old mother, previously in reasonable health, had been taken into guardianship after a social worker lodged an application with the Guardianship Tribunal.

She was placed in a nursing home, and when Ms Gordon visited her she was shocked to discover that she had been "drugged out of her brain" on anti-psychotics and anti-depressants, was almost comatose, and was suffering serious side-effects such as subcutaneous bleeding, anorexia and symptoms resembling Parkinson's disease.

Ms Gordon said that when she questioned the treatment, the police were called and she had been forbidden to visit her mother, seeing her for only five minutes in the past nine months.

A third witness, Rosemary Darietta, said her daughter Nicole, who suffered from epilepsy and a mild developmental disability, had been "put in a toxic chemical straitjacket" of massive doses of lithium and other drugs after being treated at Sutherland Hospital.

She said this caused Nicole to sleep for up to 22 hours a day, to have blurred vision, slurred speech, to lose her co-ordination and to increase in weight from 57 to 103 kilograms. She said that when she protested, a doctor told her: "I think it's time we took Nicole away from you. You know we always win."

However, when an application was made to have her placed in guardianship, Ms Darietta got independent medical advice and became "the one person in 100" to win her case at the Guardianship Tribunal.

Nicole had returned home, and returned to normal. "They said if I took my daughter off the anti-psychotics she would finish up in Rozelle (psychiatric hospital) for the rest of her life. The exact opposite happened - she can now lead a near-normal life," she said.

"If I had not won the tribunal [case] I'd have a dead daughter on my hands," she told the committee "It's

disgraceful. I hope this inquiry will not just be a whitewash and something will be done about it."

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