

## Disability advocate says she was 'humiliated, degraded' by staff at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital

ABC CENTRAL COAST – MARY-LOUISE VINCE AND LUCY THACKRAY

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PHOTO Stephanie Travers alleges she was abused when seeking treatment for mental health issues at Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital.

ABC CENTRAL COAST: COLIN KERR

There are calls for major changes to the way the New South Wales mental health system treats people with disabilities, with police investigating allegations of abuse in a Sydney hospital.

### Key points:

- A disability advocate says she was humiliated, degraded and bruised after being falsely accused of smoking in hospital toilets
- Stephanie Travers says she was tipped out of her wheelchair and denied equipment to use the bathroom

- Hospital staff have apologised over the incident and the local health district is investigating

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When disability advocate Stephanie Travers agreed to get help for depression at Royal North Shore Hospital in September she was looking for care and support, but she said the following 24 hours were traumatic.

"[I felt] incredibly humiliated, degraded," Ms Travers said.

"Like no care or concern was given to me at all. No-one cared about whether they hurt me."

The hospital said staff had apologised and an investigation was underway.

Ms Travers has spina bifida and uses a wheelchair because part of her spinal cord is stuck to the base of her lower spine.

She had always been outspoken about the challenges of her physical disability but, until now, has kept her mental health struggles to herself.

According to Ms Travers, it all started when she was falsely accused of smoking in the hospital toilet and culminated with her being sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

"At no time did I ever threaten to leave or hurt anybody apart from just asserting my rights about this incident that I got accused of doing," she said.

She claims her strong denials saw her manhandled by a hospital security guard before being sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

"I was refused access to my wheelchair and told it was a weapon," she said.

"I was refused access to my leg braces, I was refused access to clothing, I was refused access to medical equipment to go to the bathroom."

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 Red and purple bruises on a woman's arm

PHOTO The bruises wheelchair-bound woman Stephanie Travers says she received while in hospital to receive help for mental health issues.

SUPPLIED: STEPHANIE TRAVERS

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## 'I was simply told to leave'

Ms Travers alleges the abuse continued by three nurses who attempted to confiscate her phone, which she was using to call her mother.

"It fell on the floor and they tipped me out of my wheelchair onto the tiles where I hit my head and hurt the entire left side of my body" she said.

But within hours, after a complaint by her mother who heard the entire incident, she was considered well enough to be released from the hospital.

"I got no discharge summary, no follow up, no referral to the mental health services," she said.

"I was simply told to leave."

She had bruising to her arms, legs and hand and said she was bedbound with pain for a week after the incident.

She lodged an official complaint with the Northern Sydney Local Health District and has also reported the matter to police.

The smoking fine that sparked the dispute has since been withdrawn.

"There's nothing protecting people with a physical disability under the Mental Health Act," Ms Travers said.

"I would expect that there would be regard for my physical disability and expect that excessive force not be used."

"There need to be policies and practices put in place to account for that."

It is a view supported by national advocacy group, People With Disability (PWD) Australia, which maintains people with disabilities suffer high rates of mental illness.

"The current system is very institutionalised," PWD chief executive Jeff Smith said.

"It's very isolating, often coercive, and not a model that works for them in therapeutic or social terms.

"Taking someone's catheter away is clearly designed to humiliate and degrade that person rather than any possible rationale around safety or care or concern."



A photo of a woman's arm with dark bruises

PHOTO Photographs of Stephanie Travers' bruised arm after she claims she was abused at a Sydney hospital.

SUPPLIED: STEPHANIE TRAVERS

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## Calls for 'transformative change'

The issue was raised at a Geneva convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities earlier this year, and there is also a push to have it reviewed by the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Ms Travers wants changes to policy and staff training, but PWD Australia has gone further.

It wants "transformative change" to the mental health system.

"We do need a new model, a new community-based model, where people are looked after by their peers and family in a community setting," Mr Smith said.

In a statement, the North Sydney Local Health District said hospital staff apologised to the patient for her distress and the matter was being independently investigated.

"Physical restraint is always the last resort, only when de-escalation techniques have failed," the statement said.

Ms Travers just wanted to ensure others were not subjected to the same treatment in future.

"We're meant to have person-centred, holistic trauma-informed care now," she said.

"But it's not caring — it's restraint, seclusion, exploitation, threats, and assault, and it shouldn't happen."

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