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Fears abolition of Guardianship Board will lead to more mental health dramas

ABOLITION of the State Guardianship Board will create a new generation of mentally ill people “falling through the cracks” the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists warns.

BRAD CROUCH MEDICAL REPORTER MEDICAL REPORTER

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20/07/14 - Clovelly Park Community Meeting at the Glandore Community Centre. Environment minister Ian Hunter speaks to the media before the meeting. Photo Tom Huntley

ABOLITION of the State Guardianship Board will create a new generation of mentally ill people “falling through the cracks” the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists warns.

College SA branch chair Dr Michelle Atchison has written to a range of MPs protesting the move, calling it “a retrograde step that is likely to lead to degradation in the quality of service currently given to vulnerable members of our community.”

The Guardianship Board comprises three people — a lawyer, a psychiatrist and a community member — and deals with the legal affairs of patients who are under orders from a psychiatrist.

A board member who asked not to be named separately told *The Advertiser* the move was like the policy of deinstitutionalising mentally ill people “which is now regarded by many as a mistake — people who had structure in their lives were left to aimlessly wander around Rundle Mall”.

A move driven by Attorney-General John Rau now before State Parliament will roll a range of tribunals into a “super tribunal” called the South Australian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (SACAT).

At present, the Guardianship Board works from an informal setting in the ABC building at Collinswood, which board members say is designed to be friendly rather than intimidating.

The new SACAT will be in the court precinct in the city.

Dr Atchison said the board works well at the moment.

“People who go there are in quite dire straits — the Board has good relationships with these people,” she said.

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“We will be losing that expertise and that relationship by rolling it into a tribunal that handles all sorts of other legal matters.

“People with mental illnesses are intimidated by the court system — we will have people falling through the cracks and the serious problems that will be created for the future will more than wipe out any perceived cost savings.”

Dr Atchinson’s letter to MPs notes the shift to the city court precinct will cause stress for people dealing with mental illnesses.

“Such a move would mean that people with a mental illness or impairment would be required to attend a large, intimidating legal office building that will be more logistically difficult to access and appear before a ‘super-tribunal’,” the letter states.

“Intimidation of this kind is feared to some degree by most people, but for those with mental illness or impairment it adds to their sense of being stigmatised and powerless and is counter productive to any perception of fairness or just outcome.”

Acting Attorney-General Ian Hunter said the new SACAT would be an easily accessible, fair and efficient “one-stop-shop” for dealing with a broad range of disputes.

“The SACAT will be structured in a way that maintains the supports needed for those who are vulnerable and have special needs,” he said.

“In respect of vulnerable people, South Australia has combined a guardianship and mental health tribunal for 20 years and that practice will continue under SACAT.

“All interstate administrative tribunals deal with guardianship and administration matters, and some also deal with mental health matters in either their original or review jurisdictions.

“People currently dealt with by the Guardianship Board will continue to be well supported, with SACAT’s Community Stream set to operate out of the Guardianship Board’s current premises, and the ability to hold hearings in hospitals.”

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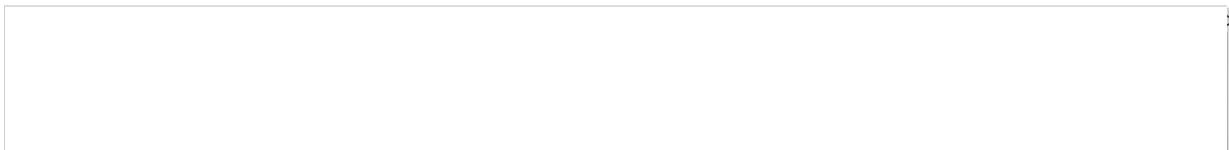
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