

Cram House

1975 – 2003

Details

Cram House was established in 1975 by the Illawarra Society for Crippled Children, as a residential facility for children with intellectual and physical disabilities. The Illawarra Society had existed since 1932, and was bequeathed the Cram House property in 1965.

After the property was used for a variety of activities run by the Society, it opened as a Special Purpose Nursing Home called Cram House in 1975. Funding for Cram House was initially provided by the Commonwealth Government. In 1993 this changed to funding and oversight being provided by the New South Wales state government. Cram House also received some income from fundraising, donations and investments (Community Services Commission, p.7).

Cram House was for 26 children with severe intellectual and physical disabilities. While it was meant to accommodate children up to 16 years of age, by 1998 the Community Services Commission noted that there were people ranging from 2-31 years living there. The older residents had started at Cram House as children, and then remained there as no other suitable accommodation could be found (Community Services Commission, p.6).

Some renovations were done to the building in the early 1980s to extend facilities and provide for “less institutional accommodation”, however the Community Services Commission noted that “sleeping accommodation include[d] dormitory-style rooms for 8 or 4, double bedrooms and some single bedrooms” (Community Services Commission p.6). There were also two living areas, including a recreation room, and an outdoor recreation area.

In 1998, following reports of the mistreatment, inadequate care and deaths of residents, the Community Services Commission undertook an Inquiry into conditions at Cram House.

The Community Services Commission concluded that “Cram House does not provide for the particular needs of children, including protection, permanency planning, family involvement, and opportunities for development” (p.10).

It stated that there had been a number of incidents involving residents and staff which had led to injuries for some residents and the deaths of 6 children and young people in the period 1995-1998. It also noted that these deaths were not reported to any external authorities at the time, as legally Cram House was not obliged to, but that they were instead referred to as “de-registrations” (Community Services Commission, p.28).

The Community Services Commission also found that medical consents were not properly obtained from parents and guardians of residents; that records of medical treatments were not kept; and that a number of children were prescribed medications “listed as being ‘not recommended for children’ or where the safety and effectiveness of the drug in children is not established” (p.32). These drugs included Mogadon, Prozac, Serenace, and Depo Provera for the majority of residents who were menstruating.

The Community Services Commission noted the lack of suitable documented policies and procedures and stated that “record keeping by the service is chaotic” (p.50). It further noted a lack of knowledge about child protection principles, and that procedures and processes did not exist to keep residents safe. The Commission noted that reported incidences of suspected sexual abuse by staff were dismissed by the Board of Directors, meaning that the staff members involved were not separated from residents or sanctioned in any way.

While Cram House employed nursing and other professionally trained staff, it was also reliant on volunteers and students to provide assistance to the paid staff and help with residents’ meals and activities. It was noted that “new staff, volunteers and students are not effectively ‘screened’ prior to appointment”, leading to further risks to residents (p.52). It was also noted that staff were not adequately trained to manage the residents’ behaviour, or to provide age-appropriate care and recreation.

The Community Services Commission recommended that Cram House be closed within 2 years, and made a number of additional recommendations addressing both specific and systematic issues it identified at Cram House, and for the residential disability sector more broadly.

The Community Services Commission completed its Inquiry and report in early 1998. The Illawarra Society immediately responded by making many changes to the operations at Cram House, and the Community Services Commission noted that “their reaction to the report, and the changes that began immediately, had been so impressive that the commission had decided not to release the report publicly”. However the report was leaked to the Illawarra Mercury and subsequently released to all media (“Cram House Parents Tackle Bureaucrats”).

Further funding was provided by the NSW government to improve conditions at Cram House (“Cram House Reprieved”), however it was announced in 2000 that Cram House would be closed and its residents transitioned to alternative accommodation by 2003 (“End of the Road for Cram House”). All residents were moved out to group homes run by the Cram Foundation in 2003, and the building was sold in 2006.

Following the sale in 2006, the original Cram House building was demolished in 2012. The site is now the Wollongong Private Hospital.

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