



MEDIA RELEASE

DAMNING OMBUDSMAN REPORT REVEALS DANGEROUS FAILURES IN BAMAGA HOSPITAL CARE

Six-year-old Torres Strait Islander boy died after being sent home with Panadol five times

Sydney, Australia – Monday 24 August 2020

First Nations people should be aware that this Media Release contains the name of a child who has died. His name is used with the permission of the family.

The tragic death of six-year-old Charlie Gowa has been investigated by the Queensland Office of the Health Ombudsman (OHO), with damning findings being released today.

Charlie was a strong and happy boy, looked up to by his little brother and sister. He was the tallest in his class and dearly loved by his close-knit Torres Strait Islander community.

In early January 2017, he woke up sick – he had a fever, vomited up his breakfast, looked weak and had greenish black diarrhoea. His parents were so worried that his Mum Xernona took him to the hospital to get him help. They were sent home with just some Panadol and an ice-block.

That night, Charlie got sicker. He was having trouble breathing, was vomiting without having eaten, and his skin was burning so much that he would get irritated if his Mum touched him. They went back to the hospital the next day but were given Panadol and sent home again.

They ended up visiting the hospital every day for six days, until Charlie was finally admitted. By that stage he was probably already critically ill. He was urgently flown to Cairns and then Brisbane for treatment. By the time he got to Brisbane, Charlie was already too sick. His parents made the heart-breaking decision to turn off his life support, nine days after they first asked Bamaga Hospital to help Charlie.

The OHO report makes it clear that what happened to Charlie was the tragic culmination of widespread systemic issues affecting Bamaga Hospital and Torres and Cape Hospital and Health Service (TCHHS). Despite most people in the region identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, the services there were not culturally appropriate to serve the community.

Charlie's father, Ron Gowa, wants people to know what happened to his little boy so things can change:

“I want justice for my little boy. I also want change. Our community needs access to safe healthcare, just like any Australian community does. No family should face the barriers that we faced in trying to save our son.”

Charlie’s mother, Xernona PoiPoi, explained why she wants her son’s story told:

“I tried so hard to get my son the help that he needed. The hospital would not help him and there was nowhere else we could go. These problems have existed for so long and they are still there today. I want better for my family and my community.”

The Ombudsman’s report identifies significant improvements which are required at Bamaga Hospital, which will require sustained effort and support from TCHHS, including to ensure culturally appropriate practices and implemented.

The National Justice Project is representing the family in their efforts to secure justice for Charlie and meaningful improvements in access to healthcare for the community. The family’s lawyer, Anna Talbot from the National Justice Project, said:

“At the heart of this problem is systemic racism. We see these issues arise time and again, with First Nations people who are seriously ill being turned away from hospitals. Charlie and his family should never have been put in the position of having to beg for basic healthcare. Charlie was so sick, and he just kept getting worse. He, his family and his community deserved what most Australians would take for granted: safe and effective healthcare.”

The OHO report can be found here: <https://www.oho.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Investigation-report-Bamaga-hospital-FINAL20200824.pdf>

For comment, please contact Anna Talbot, Senior Solicitor and Legal Practice Manager at the National Justice Project on 0420 947874 or annat@justice.org.au.

The National Justice Project is a not for profit legal organisation. We combine strategic legal action with effective advocacy to advance human rights and social justice in Australia and in the Pacific Region.

For further information please visit our website – www.justice.org.au