

Media Release

26 April 2005 - For immediate release

Sex Abuse can lead to Mental Illness

"Incest survives in silence. Incest will continue to occur if the survivor feels shamed about telling of their experiences." KH, a survivor of sexual abuse.

*It is estimated that 'seventy per cent of psychiatric patients are known to have been sexually abused,' says Judi Shearer quoting the findings of the Queensland Government's Forde Enquiry into child abuse. Ms Shearer is a Brisbane therapist whose conference **New Horizons in Health Philosophy** will take place in Brisbane in May. The cost of the conference has been deliberately priced so as not to exclude those – such as carers and non-profit health organizations – who are integral in improving the quality of care in mental and social health in Australia.*

Ms Shearer, a neuro-linguistic therapist with 25 years professional experience, has counselled many survivors of sexual abuse. She says, *'Findings from a recently published study on child abuse reveal that in 2003-4 there were 219,384 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to state authorities and that one child is reported as abused every 2 minutes.'*

'The time is long overdue for a multi-disciplinary approach to this crisis,' Ms Shearer says. 'The New Horizons In Health Philosophy conference offers this opportunity. Let's stop flinching from the challenge, pull together our resources and make the necessary changes.'

'The mind often valiantly attempts to separate itself from a trauma too awful to confront -, trauma from sexual abuse, for instance. This creates a dissociative disorder', Ms Shearer explains. 'Once the label of mental illness is attached to someone suffering a dissociative disorder, that person – who is already suffering terrible personal pain – is forced into further social isolation and exclusion. That person ceases to be a valued member of the community, even of his or her own family.'

The conference's keynote speaker, acclaimed New Zealand psychologist Dr. John Read, says *'Victims of paedophilia live in a world that the rest of us can't even begin to envisage. By calling their "other existence" a chemical imbalance and treating it with drugs trivializes the problem. We have a duty to confront the truth, seek out the hidden stories and search for alternative methods of treatment'.*

Ms Shearer sees the 'silver bullet' medication approach to mental illness as compounding an already acute problem. She says, *'There is certainly a place for drugs in the treatment of mental illness but drugs shouldn't be the automatic first option - we're already living in a society in where thousands of five to nine year-olds are being prescribed psychiatric drugs.'*

Ms Shearer states that many leading researchers and psychologists are increasingly denouncing the practice of treating sufferers of mental illness in isolation from their families and community. *'It's about listening to clients and not assuming we know their reality,'* she says.

New Horizons in Health Philosophy is a conference aimed at raising awareness of the causes and treatment of mental illness, and will examine different models of recovery for practitioners, carers and clients. It will draw together leading practitioners from both traditional and alternative fields of mental and social health, including physiologists, psychologists, practitioners of chiropractic, homeopathy, Chinese medicine and "survivors" of mental illness.

'Whether the condition is caused by sexual abuse or other trauma, our approach to the treatment of mental illness needs to be re-addressed,' Ms Shearer says. 'The Queensland AMA has stated that mental health problems and disorders are the leading cause of disability in Australia, accounting for 30% of the overall non-fatal disease burden.'

NEW HORIZONS IN HEALTH PHILOSOPHY - Friday 13 May 2005.

Information on venue, keynotes speakers, presenters and workshops available on request
Please contact Judi Shearer on **M:** 0416 220 539, **E:** shearerj@zygo.com.au