The families of people with a lived experience of mental health difficulties very often devote large parts of their lives to supporting and caring for their loved one. Regardless of how ‘family’ is defined - to include friends, spouses, carers, children, and neighbours - their contribution to the lives of people with a mental health condition cannot be underestimated.

Contemporary international research indicates that involving families and carers in mental health service provision has been continually demonstrated to reduce relapse rates and facilitate recovery of persons who have a mental disorder. Scientific Research has now revealed the important role that families play in helping in the person recover toward a valued lifestyle within and beyond the limits of mental health problems they are experiencing.

Australian mental health policy directives concede that having families and carers actively involved in the development, planning, delivery and evaluation of mental health services is fundamentally important to the delivery of appropriate, responsive and high quality services to people with a mental illness.

Australia is internationally renowned for its world leading innovations in population-based mental health policy yet despite this Australia has not yet managed to achieve routine widespread implementation of these policy directives and thus mental health services are yet to fully realize the involvement of families and carers at all points of the service delivery system.

This leads to mental health families and carers feeling that they are not considered partners in care and feel more excluded from the treatment process.

I am in my 9th year as a peer family consultant and advocate and first year as a National Mental Health Commissioner, in that time I have heard many stories of distress, despair, hopelessness, grief and bewilderment from families and carers trying to navigate the mental health system, the social services system and the welfare system.
And although Mental Health families and carers also relate positive stories where both they and the people they care about have benefitted from one or another service or intervention, gaps exist between optimally effective treatment, care and service provision and what many consumers, their families and carers receive in actual practice or service settings.

The survey findings described in the Recognition and Respect Mental Health Carers Report 2012 provides many valuable insights into the lives of mental health families and carers. It is a valuable document. It is a document to be commended; because without knowing this valuable information we as a nation, jurisdiction or service provider cannot adequately respond to the specific needs of mental health families and carers. And without an understanding of their personal experiences of mental health systems, social service systems and welfare systems, how do we know that support services are being responsive to individual circumstances of both the person living with a mental health difficulty, their families and carers.

Investing in this type of research is critical.

And as such I would to thank the Mental Health Council of Australia for their dedication to mental health families and carers by giving families and carers the opportunity to have their experiences documented, and thus ensuring that Australia has a comprehensive report that describes family and carers’ perspectives on the extent to which mental health and other services are accessible, appropriate and sensitive to the needs of consumers, their families and carers.

Congratulations