



Home / News / Health

'It felt like a prison': mental health patients say they left Canberra Hospital worse off

By Kiara Angelini
August 2 2026 - 5:30am



Philip Cristallo was seeking a lifeline when he walked into the mental health unit at Canberra Hospital.

Instead, he felt as though he stepped into a "fishbowl" trapped in an environment he says is hostile.

Patients at the Adult Mental Health Unit (AMHU) say they were left at risk after being discharged prematurely, while children were admitted alongside acutely unwell adults despite there being a dedicated youth ward.



Philip Cristallo speaks about his experience at the adult mental health unit at Canberra Hospital. Picture by Karleen Minney

ADVERTISEMENT

The Canberra Times spoke to several people that said the hospital failed to provide adequate support to both mental health patients and their parents.

Cristallo's experience in AMHU

Mr Cristallo was admitted to the unit in 2014 after he attempted to take his own life and was readmitted a year later for about two weeks.

During an argument over a knee brace he was wearing when admitted the second time, he alleges staff members took him into a side room, ordered him to remove his clothes, restrained him and injected him with a sedative without an explanation.

Several hours later, he said he had an allergic reaction to the sedative.

"It felt like my muscles were crushing my bones, and I could barely expand my lungs," he said.

Mr Cristallo said that he crawled to the nurses' station before collapsing. He was told by other patients it took about 15 minutes for

nurses to assess him.

He said the experience left him so distressed he was unable to file a complaint.

Cristallo left in a vulnerable state

Shortly after the allergic reaction, he alleges he was discharged without papers. When he later requested them, there was no record of the allergic reaction.



Fungus Is A Parasite, And It Dies From A Drop Of Plain...

Orivelle

"They were so quick to push me out. I did not feel like I got any assistance with what I actually needed support for," he said.

"I'm not saying the nurses do a bad job because they do all that they can. They go through like legitimate hell while they're there."

A month after Mr Cristallo was discharged, his mental health deteriorated and it was recommended he be readmitted for further support.

"I begged them not to send me to AMHU, I was breaking. I literally broke down into tears," he said.

Taking into account his concerns, the assessment team decided to admit him to a unit at a different hospital.

AMHU faces criticism from parents

AMHU opened on March 23, 2012, and is located at the Canberra Hospital in Garran. It now offers 40 beds, split between a high and low dependency unit for adult short-stay patients.

The child and adolescent mental health unit at the hospital provides care for patients aged 12 to 18 years, with a capacity of six beds.

Emma Ford said she has not been given an explanation for why her 16-year-old daughter was admitted to the adult ward when she had a mental health crisis in February this year.

ADVERTISEMENT

Ad

Ms Ford alleges her teenager was excessively sedated multiple times during her stay at the unit, and was not allowed to contact her family members.

"If I wasn't supporting my daughter, then she probably would have been dead," Ms Ford said.

She alleges when her daughter was discharged without papers she was left without adequate ongoing support: the hospital did not check in, provide a counselor or any ongoing treatment.

"They just basically chuck them on the street," Ms Ford said.

Her daughter was readmitted by ambulance later that night.

"It's just a continuous thing. She got put in there. They'd sedate her, not help her, no follow ups," she said.

A spokesperson for the Canberra Health Services said they were unable to comment on individual cases for privacy reasons.

"The decision to place a young person (under 18) in AMHU is only made when necessary and is done in consultation with the young person, family/carers and CAMHS specialists," the spokesperson said.

Readmission

The independent government reviewer, Official Visitors, said in its most recent annual report that the issue of children being admitted to the adult ward has been reported in the quarterly reports for the last three years.

ADVERTISEMENT

Ad

Their analysis of complaints against the hospital said that "this practice can result in further trauma and the worsening of young people's condition".

ACT Public Advocate Jodie Griffiths-Cook said she has raised concerns to the unit about the admission of young people into the adult ward multiple times.

She said young people are "feeling unsafe amongst adults who are acutely unwell and feeling isolated from others of their own age".



■ WATCH: New research suggests the effects of childhood bullying can last well into adulthood, with almost nine in 10 Australians believing early criticism can have a lasting impact on confidence. This video includes ACM-produced voiceover powered by AI.

Ms Griffiths-Cook said this may result in young people being discharged before they are stabilised, placing them at a higher risk of readmission.

ADVERTISEMENT

Ad

About one in eight acute mental health patients in the ACT are readmitted to hospital within 28 days of being discharged, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's most recent data.

"The majority of readmission cases in the ACT relate to a small number of consumers who can experience frequent acute episodes of mental ill health," a Canberra Health Services spokesperson said.

Minister for Mental Health Dr Marisa Paterson said: "I take any concerns raised about a patient's care seriously."

Ms Paterson said she encourages patients, families or carers with concerns to contact Canberra Health Services Consumer Feedback or

their treatment team.

AMHU now "feels worse"

After nearly a decade, Mr Cristallo walked back into AMHU to visit a recently admitted family member. The shivering experience left him concerned that the unit "felt even more institutional" than when he was a patient.

"I just felt the fishbowl experience again but this time it was worse because there was a lot of security and it felt more like a prison than where you get better."

He said staff and patient safety is important, but the environment is distressing and concerning for mental health patients today.

ADVERTISEMENT

Ad

He said his family member left the hospital saying he never wants to end up there again, after an experience that was far too familiar to Mr Cristallo.

- Lifeline 13 11 14 ; Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800 (for people aged 5 to 25)

Read More:

'My heart is broken': Canberra man loses three to 'devastating' Venezuelan earthquake



Vantage Strata 'vindicated' by tribunal finding, still vows to do more



Save

Share

Related topics

Health

Most viewed

1 'Life changed': How one teen's disappearance shaped



2 Jail sentence set to be reduced for driver who killed Matthew



3 Mafia and escort bosses named in notorious cold case



4 Meet the federal public sector's most influential people



5 I'm a full-time travel editor and this 'James Bond' moment in



6 Man threw himself in front of a tram for a warm bed, Havelock



More from Health

Labor holds firm as seniors face \$250 health cover hike

Fresh hope as treatment cost slashed for rare cancer

'Cancer doesn't wait': a new plan to help rural men

Nation-first fully-integrated bionic arm to hit shelves

'It felt like a prison': mental health patients say they left Canberra Hospital worse off

'Starting to take off': bird flu mass mortality likely

Newsletters & Alerts

[View all](#)

AS IT HAPPENS

Breaking news alert

Be the first to know when news breaks.

[+ Sign Up](#)



DAILY **Subscriber Only**

Early Look At David Pope

Your exclusive preview of David Pope's latest cartoon.

[+ Sign Up](#)

Dream Homes by **allhomes** 

You May Like

Memory loss isn't caused by age: Just stop doing this in your sleep

Consumer Times | Sponsored

Sleep Apnea is Linked to This Household Item (Stop Using It)

derila-ergo-official.com | Sponsored

The Surprising Cause Of Memory Loss

Consumer Times | Sponsored

The Truth About Bupa vs HCF (Senior Aussies Take Note)

Billy Explores | Sponsored

Knee Arthritis: Rub This One Thing In Every Night

After 50, joint pain and stiffness may hit harder — see why many are rubbing this one thing every night.

Orevive Wellness | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Millions Affected by Rebate Cut - Check Your Health Fund

Billy Explores Savings | Sponsored

The biggest mistake almost everyone makes when cleaning shower glass

Home Clean Tip | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Knee Pain Won't Stop? Rub This Before Bed Tonight

After 60, knee arthritis may hit harder. Here's why many are rubbing this one thing every night.

Orevive Wellness | Sponsored

[Learn More](#)

Unable to work due to injury or illness?

You may be able to make an insurance claim through your Superannuation.

Brydens Lawyers | Sponsored

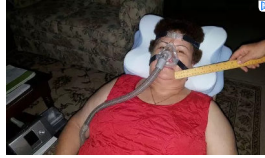
[Learn More](#)

Australians Aged 50-80 Could Be Eligible For This

Select your age and find out if you're eligible

Golden Insurance | Sponsored

Learn More



Sleep Apnea is Linked to This Household Item (Stop Using...

derila-ergo-official.com

Crepey Skin: Most People Use Lotions. Koreans Do This Instead (It's Genius)

Crepey Skin | Sponsored

Most gardens miss the one thing butterflies actually need

Butterfly Lovers | Sponsored

Order Now

1 Vitamin You Need After 50 For Memory Loss and Brain Fog

Memory Loss | Sponsored

Family suspect twist in likely death of missing boy Gus

The Canberra Times

I have dominion over my wife, says Kanye West

The Canberra Times

Woman 'dead before tractor accident with husband'

A woman recorded a video hours before her body was found near machinery saying that if she was...

Pedal to the metal: Gladstone company helps drive net zero transformation

Discover how Alpha HPA's new Gladstone refinery supports Australia's net-zero emissions goal with sustainable HPA production.

ACM Branded Content | Dept of Net Zero | Sponsored

**Improving Smiles,
Relieving Pain &
Discomfort**

AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY MEDIA



THE CANBERRA TIMES



OUR SITES



SUBMIT

