



**Australian
Broadcasting
Authority**

Investigation Report 1416

File No:	2004/0962
Licensee	Channel Seven Sydney Pty Ltd
Station	ATN 7
Type of Service	Commercial Television
Name of Program	Today Tonight
Date/s of Broadcast	3 March 2004
Relevant Legislation/Codes	Clauses 4.3.1 and 4.3.11 of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice 1999

The complaint

On 3 June 2004 the Australian Broadcasting Authority (the ABA) received an unresolved written complaint from the Commonwealth Government agency, Centrelink, regarding the ‘Welfare Debt Watchdog’ segment in the *Today Tonight* program broadcast on 3 March 2004 by Channel Seven Sydney Pty Ltd (the licensee).

The complainant raised concerns relating to the general presentation and structure of the report, and alleged that specific facts were not presented accurately and viewpoints were not represented fairly.

The complainant contacted the licensee directly with the complaint, and the licensee initially undertook to provide an on-air clarification of the matter. This undertaking was subsequently withdrawn by the licensee.

The complainant also raised concerns about matters that are not covered by either the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* (the Act) or the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice 1999 (the code). As such, these matters have not been addressed in this report, including concerns relating to the alleged activities of journalists when collecting information for the segment.

The program

The *Today Tonight* current affairs program segment entitled ‘Welfare Debt Watchdog’ reported on Rod Whyte, a former Centrelink employee, who now runs a business assisting Centrelink customers with overpayment debts attributed to Centrelink errors.

The segment included a highly critical report by the *Today Tonight* reporter, who made the following assertions:

- the processing error rate at Centrelink is extremely high and many people find themselves in debt to the Government Agency through no fault of their own
- Centrelink had overpaid \$5.6 billion over the last five years
- allegations by the daughters of a former Centrelink customer, Mrs [X], that their mother’s suicide was a result of Centrelink’s continual pressure on her to find a job, and
- Centrelink refused to provide the appropriate financial assistance to Mrs [X].

The segment was approximately four and a half minutes in duration. A full transcript of the broadcast is provided in Appendix A of this report.

Code provisions

For the purposes of this report, the relevant provisions are clauses 4.3.1 and 4.3.11 of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice 1999 which provide:

In broadcasting news and current affairs programs, licensees:

- 4.3.1 must present factual material accurately and represent viewpoints fairly, having regard to the circumstances at the time of preparing and broadcasting the program;

[...]

-
- 4.3.11 must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity.

The ABA notes that a significant proportion of the report constituted the expression of opinions and viewpoints. Implications, inferences and the expression of opinions and viewpoints do not constitute factual material and therefore are not relevant to the accuracy obligations imposed by clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Assessment

The ABA sought a videotape of the segment from the licensee and comments in relation to the report's compliance with relevant provisions of the code.

The ABA considered the following allegations made by the complainant:

- in terms of the segment's compliance with the code requirement in clause 4.3.1 to present factual material accurately:
 1. The segment's description of Mr Whyte as one of Centrelink's highest ranking officers and former Chief Fraud Investigator
 2. The claim that Mr Whyte quit Centrelink in disgust at the huge number of mistakes and
 3. The claim made by the reporter that Centrelink refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X]
- in terms of the segment's compliance with the Code requirement in clause 4.3.1 to represent viewpoints fairly:
 4. The portrayal of a woman's \$35,000 overpayment debt as a Centrelink error
 5. The allegation that Centrelink's continual pressure resulted in Mrs [X]'s suicide and
 6. No effort was made to allow Centrelink to respond to the suicide allegations.
- The ABA also considered the segment's compliance with the Code requirement in clause 4.3.11 to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity.

Issue 1. Did the licensee present factual material accurately?

1. *The segment's description of Mr Whyte as one of Centrelink's highest ranking officers and former Chief Fraud Investigator*

Complainant's submission

In their letter of complaint to the ABA, dated 3 June 2004, the complainant asserted:

Centrelink claim that *Today Tonight's* description of Mr Whyte as being one of Centrelink's highest-ranking officers and a former Chief Fraud Investigator was inaccurate because:

- Mr Whyte's position when he left Centrelink was EL1. This is the lowest classification in the leadership group; and
- Mr Whyte never held any position within Centrelink which involved fraud investigation and there is not now, nor has there ever been a position titled Chief Fraud Investigator.

Licensee's submission

In their response to the ABA's request for comments, dated 30 July 2004, the licensee asserted:

Mr Whyte was a member of the Centrelink 'leadership group', which we understand makes him a high ranking employee; and

Although 'Chief Fraud Investigator' was not actually Mr Whyte's official title, we understand that he was involved in projects relating to over payment issues.

In a further submission, the licensee made the following comment:

Given that Centrelink employs more than 27,000 staff, we do not believe that a description of Mr Whyte as being 'one of the highest ranking officers' is inaccurate purely because there are 86 Centrelink employees that had a higher rank than Mr Whyte.

Finding

The ABA finds that factual material in the broadcast of 3 March 2004 about Mr Whyte's seniority and title of his former position with Centrelink were not presented accurately. Accordingly, the licensee breached clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

The report included the following statements (emphasis added by ABA):

Naomi Robson: For years we've been bringing you stories about monumental Centrelink bungles. Bungles that have often left battling Australians thousands of dollars out of pocket. Well now **one of Centrelink's highest-ranking officers** has come out to expose the mistake-ridden system. But more importantly he wants to help and he's more than willing to take Centrelink head-on. Michelle Tapper has the story.

Michelle Tapper: This is the man Centrelink fears. **Their former Chief Fraud Investigator** who knows more about their blunders than they do.

There is no dispute between the two parties that Mr Whyte was a former Centrelink employee and that he belonged to Centrelink's 'leadership group'.

While Mr Whyte was a member of Centrelink's 'leadership group', his classification was the lowest within that group and he was not one of Centrelink's highest ranking officers as described in the broadcast. An average viewer would have drawn a different conclusion from the story based on the description of Mr Whyte.

Centrelink's Annual Report 2002-03¹ provides details of all Australian Public Service employees within Centrelink. As of 30 June 2003, Centrelink employed 1491 staff at the Centrelink 4 Band (EL1 & EL2). A further 86 employees were employed above this level at the Senior Executive Service (SES) grade.

Thus, an average viewer would understand from the description of Mr Whyte as 'one of Centrelink's highest ranking officers' that he was a member of the Senior Executive Service, and not an officer at the Centrelink 4 Band. As such, the average viewer would consider that

¹ <http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/ar0203/index.htm>

Mr Whyte was privy to high-level management information and would have a particular insight into Centrelink's business practices.

Furthermore, Mr Whyte was described in the segment as Centrelink's former Chief Fraud Investigator. The ABA understands that there has never been a position in Centrelink with this title.

2. The claim that Mr Whyte quit Centrelink in disgust at the huge number of mistakes Complainant's submission

In the letter of complaint to the ABA, the complainant asserted that Mr Whyte gave a personal reason for leaving Centrelink, unrelated to his work at Centrelink.

Licensee's submission

In their response to the ABA's request for comments, the licensee asserted:

- ... it is frequently the case that employees do not communicate to their employer the reason for their departure, due to many factors such as:
- the desire to obtain a good reference;
 - the avoidance of confrontation; and
 - not wanting to damage relationships with colleagues and associates.
 -

Finding

The ABA finds that factual material relating to the reason for Mr Whyte's departure from Centrelink was presented accurately. Accordingly, the licensee did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

The report included the following statements (emphasis added by ABA):

Michelle Tapper: Rod Whyte worked for Centrelink for 13 years. **He quit disgusted by the huge number of mistakes.**

The licensee has submitted to the ABA, that an employee may not communicate to their employer the reason for their departure due to a number of other considerations. Although Mr Whyte may have given his former employer, Centrelink, a personal reason for leaving this does not, in itself, rule out a possibility that he had other motives for resigning. Therefore the reporter's interpretation that 'Rod Whyte quit Centrelink in disgust at the huge number of mistakes' was plausible, based on the information she had before her.

Further, since leaving Centrelink Mr Whyte has established a business named 'Welfare Watchdog', which offers a service investigating debts for Centrelink customers. Statements made by Mr Whyte during the course of the segment would suggest that he was dissatisfied with the high number of Centrelink errors. This is reinforced by comments on Mr Whyte's 'Welfare Watchdog' website:²

After contacting us, many of our clients have also managed to have their payments corrected and future debts prevented because of faulty advice, incorrect processing or misinterpretation of legislation. And let's not forget your ongoing dealings with

² <http://www.welfarewatchdog.com.au>

Centrelink ... you'll also find that you will be armed with information that will help prevent errors in your payment that are typically caused by Centrelink mistakes.

3. The claim made by the reporter that Centrelink refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X]

Complainant's submission

The complainant submitted that:

The program stated that Centrelink refused to put Mrs [X] on sickness benefit. In fact, the customer was on Newstart Allowance Incapacitated, the payment you refer to as sickness benefit, at the time of her death.

Licensee's submission

In their response to the ABA's request for comments, the licensee did not specifically address this matter.

Finding

The ABA finds that factual material in the statement that Centrelink refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X], was not presented accurately. Accordingly, the licensee breached clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

Centrelink does not have a sickness benefit payment *per se*. The benefit known as sickness allowance was phased out in 1996 and replaced by Newstart Allowance (Incapacitated). From this date, people who were temporarily incapacitated for work due to illness were granted Newstart Allowance (Incapacitated).³

Mrs [X] was receiving Newstart Allowance (Incapacitated) at the time of her death. Therefore, Mrs [X] was receiving 'sickness benefits' at the time of her death.

Issue 2. Did the licensee represent viewpoints fairly?

4. The portrayal of a woman's \$35,000 overpayment debt as a Centrelink error

Complainant's submission

In their letter of complaint to the ABA the complainant asserted:

The customer's debt was related to her failure to report earnings. The *Today Tonight* reporter had in her possession a letter from Centrelink to the customer, which provided enough information to establish that fact, yet this was completely ignored in the report and the customer's debt was portrayed as a Centrelink error.

Licensee's submission

In their response to the ABA's request for comments, the licensee did not specifically address this matter.

³ Australian Parliamentary Library – Social Security Payments for the Unemployed, the Sick and those in Special Circumstances, 1942 to 2003, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/online/special.htm>

Finding

The ABA finds that viewpoints were represented fairly in the portrayal of a customer's \$35,000 Centrelink debt. Accordingly, the licensee did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

The report included the following statements (emphasis added by ABA):

- Mrs [Y]:** Centrelink claims that I have been overpaid \$35,000.
- Michelle Tapper:** **Mrs [Y] is just one of many who've been slapped with a whopping bill from Centrelink. But they tell us she didn't report income while receiving welfare.**
- Mrs [Y]:** Centrelink said not to worry about overpayments seeing that they would be in touch with the tax department at the end of every year.
- Michelle Tapper:** Now they are taking \$100 a fortnight from her salary.
- Mrs [Y]:** To me the whole situation is a nightmare.
- Rod Whyte:** **Even though it may have been a Centrelink mistake it's still a debt to the Commonwealth that must be repaid back.**

It appears that the existence of Mrs [Y]'s Centrelink debt is not disputed. The reporter stated that Centrelink advised *Today Tonight* that the debt arose due to the failure of Mrs [Y] to report income while receiving welfare payments. The Centrelink viewpoint, that the error was due to Mrs [X]'s failure to report earnings, has been represented fairly.

It is Mr Whyte who made the statement, '[e]ven though it may have been a Centrelink mistake it's still a debt to the Commonwealth that must be repaid back'. This reflects Mr Whyte's opinion and that it was not presented as factual material.

The ABA further notes that Mr Whyte qualifies the statement in question by his use of the word 'may'. The ABA considers that this qualification identifies the statement as Mr Whyte's opinion, and the average viewer would interpret the statement as such and would be able to exercise their judgement in this regard.

The ABA has no evidence to suggest that the viewpoints of the interviewees were not represented fairly. While the complainant may dispute comments made by these interviewees, this in itself does not mean that the licensee represented their viewpoints unfairly.

5. The allegation that Centrelink's continual pressure resulted in Mrs X's suicide Complainant's submission

In their letter of complaint to the ABA the complainant asserted:

The story included an allegation, attributed to the daughters of a former Centrelink customer, that their mother's suicide was as a result of Centrelink's continual pressure on her to find a job. Centrelink rejects that allegation.

Licensee's submission

In their response to the ABA's request for comments, the licensee asserted:

The relevant statements were clearly the viewpoints of Mrs [X]'s three daughters. In our opinion, those viewpoints were accurately and fairly portrayed.

Today Tonight does regret that, as a matter of courtesy, Centrelink was not asked to comment on this matter when their comments were sought in relation to other aspects of the segment. However, we do not believe that this failure was a breach of the Codes.

[...]

The [X] family genuinely believe that Centrelink treated their mother in a manner inappropriate for someone in an emotionally unstable state of mind, and that this ultimately was a factor contributing to their mother's decision to take her own life.

Finding

The ABA finds that the viewpoints of Mrs [X]'s three daughters were represented fairly. Accordingly, the licensee did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

The report included the following statements (emphasis added by ABA):

Michelle Tapper: [A] and her sisters [B] and [C] are devastated. **They believe their mother suicided as a result of Centrelink's continual pressure on her to find a job.** Despite medical evidence to prove she was unfit to work because she was chronically depressed.

Daughter

of Mrs [X]: They should have actually sent her to a psychiatrist within Centrelink.

Michelle Tapper: Their mother, 55-year-old Mrs [X], became depressed when she lost her job after 25 years at the same biscuit factory.

Daughter

of Mrs [X]: She was disoriented, couldn't focus, was very emotional and sometimes crying because of her illness.

Michelle Tapper: Centrelink's solution – they wanted Mrs [X] to take a job in the laundry of a local hospital starting at 2.00 am. She declined because of her mental state.

Daughter

of Mrs [X]: Just let down, disappointed that such a large company that's meant to help people who have provided 25 years of work for this country have let her down so badly.

Michelle Tapper: **Centrelink refused to put Mrs [X] on sickness benefits. Her depression got worse and within 6 months she took her life.**

Section 4 of the code sets out the provisions regarding news and current affairs programs and clause 4.1 outlines the objectives of section 4, which include the aim to ensure that news and current affairs programs are presented accurately and fairly.

Clause 4.4.1 provides that news must be presented fairly and impartially. However, this provision does not apply to current affairs programs. Thus, there is no requirement under the code for current affairs programs to be neutral, nor does it require a licensee to present all viewpoints. However, the code does require that when viewpoints are presented, they are presented fairly.

The ABA considers the statement, ‘they believe their mother suicided as a result of Centrelink’s continual pressure on her to find a job’ to be the reporter’s presentation of views expressed to her in interviews by Mrs [X]’s daughters. The average viewer would interpret the statement as such and would be able to exercise their judgement in this regard.

The ABA has no evidence to suggest that the reporter’s presentation of viewpoints expressed to her by Mrs [X]’s daughters was not represented fairly. While the complainant may dispute comments made by these interviewees, this in itself does not mean that their viewpoints were represented unfairly.

6. No effort was made to allow Centrelink to respond to the suicide allegations
Complainant’s submission

In their letter of complaint to the ABA the complainant asserted:

No effort was made to inform Centrelink who was being interviewed for the segment or to allow Centrelink to respond to the suicide allegations.
Centrelink supports public scrutiny of our organisation and, where warranted, criticism. However the media has a responsibility to ensure accuracy, fairness and balance in its coverage of issues. These principles certainly do not appear to be reflected in *Today Tonight*’s reporting of Centrelink matters.

Licensee’s submission

In their response to the ABA’s request for comments, the licensee asserted:

Today Tonight does regret that, as a matter of courtesy, Centrelink was not asked to comment on this matter when their comments were sought in relation to other aspects of the segment. However, we do not believe that this failure was a breach of the codes. Section 4.3.1 of the code does not require that all viewpoints on a particular matter be included within a program. It only requires that those viewpoints that are included be fairly represented and not used out of context or distorted by editing.

In an additional submission the licensee’s contentions included the following:

Centrelink’s opinion or point of view in relation to the claims made by the [X] family was not sought and was not canvassed at all within the segment. Therefore ... the ABA is seeking to impose an obligation on current affairs programs to seek ‘salient’ viewpoints and to include those viewpoints within the segment. We do not believe that the code contains any such obligation.

Finding

The ABA finds that the licensee did not represent viewpoints fairly as the broadcast created an impression that Centrelink had been given an opportunity to comment on the allegation about Mrs [X]’s suicide but had elected to say nothing. Accordingly, the ABA finds that the licensee breached clause 4.3.1 of the code.

Reasons

The segment dealt with three key issues, which in order were:

- 1) Mrs [Y]’s overpayment

-
- 2) Allegation that Mrs [X]'s suicide was a result of Centrelink's pressure on her to find a job and
 - 3) Centrelink's error rate.

Centrelink's comments were provided in relation to the first and the third matters, however, Centrelink's comments were not provided in relation to the second matter. This could have given the impression to a reasonable viewer that Centrelink had been provided with an opportunity to comment on all three matters, but had chosen to remain silent in relation to the second matter.

In their submission to the ABA, the licensee claimed that 'the ABA is seeking to impose an obligation on current affairs programs to seek 'salient' viewpoints and to include those viewpoints within the segment'. The ABA considers that this finding does not have this effect, as the requirement is only that action be taken to represent viewpoints fairly. In this regard, the licensee did not represent viewpoints fairly, as a reasonable viewer could have construed from the way the matters were presented in the segment that Centrelink had been given an opportunity to comment on the adverse allegation about Mrs [X]'s suicide and had elected to say nothing. This could have been prevented, for example, by way of an appropriate statement, when the adverse allegation was being made in the segment, to the effect that, 'time did not permit us from obtaining Centrelink's comments on this matter'.

Issue 3. Has the licensee made reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact at the earliest opportunity?

Complainant's submission

Centrelink informed *Today Tonight* on 5 March 2004 that:

- Mr Whyte's position when he left Centrelink was EL1. This is the lowest classification in the leadership group
- Mr Whyte never held any position with Centrelink which involved fraud investigation and there is not now, nor has there ever been, a position titled Chief Fraud Officer
- Mr Whyte gave a personal reason for leaving Centrelink, unrelated to his work at Centrelink.

In addition, the complainant noted that, in relation to the case of Mrs [X], the broadcast had included the claim that, 'Centrelink refused to put Mrs [X] on sickness benefit'. The complainant submits that that this was not the case and that, in fact, at the time of her death Mrs [X] was receiving an allowance known as Newstart Allowance (Incapacitated) which is the payment the program refers to as 'sickness benefit'.

Licensee's submission

In its response to the ABA's request for comments, the licensee asserted that it did not believe that the segment in question contained a significant error of fact. It stated however, that:

... Seven did initially offer to broadcast a clarification, as a courtesy, for not asking Centrelink for comments in relation to the [X] family's claims. However, we do not believe that this failure amounted to a significant error of fact that would require a correction under the code.

In addition, the licensee noted that the offer to broadcast a clarification was made in circumstances where Seven had offered to broadcast a clarification in relation to a separate story on Centrelink (a segment entitled, 'Ruthless Centrelink' and broadcast on 18 December 2003). In this regard the licensee said:

The offer to run [a] clarification was really only made in light of the fact that *Today Tonight* would already be doing one clarification. Not asking an organisation for their comments, in the absence of a factual inaccuracy, i[s] not the kind of matter we would normally consider to warrant an on air clarification.

Finding

The ABA finds the inaccuracies were not significant errors of fact that require correction at the earliest opportunity. Accordingly, the licensee did not breach clause 4.3.11 of the code.

Reasons

Clause 4.3.11 requires that licensees must make reasonable efforts to correct significant errors of fact in news and current affairs programs at the earliest opportunity. In applying this code requirement, the ABA has taken the view that the circumstances in which a licensee was likely to be expected to make a correction include those where:

- following a broadcast, it would be obvious to the licensee *prima facie*, that the material is inaccurate or
- an inaccuracy has been drawn to its attention by a complainant or another person following the broadcast.

The ABA has reached a finding that there are two errors of fact:

- representing Mr Rod Whyte as Centrelink's former Chief Fraud Investigator and one of their highest ranking officers and
- alleging that Centrelink refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X].

The ABA has considered whether the licensee should have corrected these inaccuracies at the earliest opportunity. In order to determine this, it must first be established whether these were significant errors of fact.

On the first matter, the ABA considers that the representation of Mr Whyte as a former Chief Fraud Investigator and one of Centrelink's highest ranking officers is not a significant error of fact as it would have been unlikely that an average viewer would have drawn a different conclusion in the context of the story as a whole.

On the second matter, the ABA considers that the claim that Centrelink refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X] is not a significant error of fact as it would have been unlikely that information to the contrary would have led an average viewer to a different conclusion when viewing the story as a whole.

Action taken by the licensee

The ABA notes that in response to the breach findings, the licensee has taken the following steps:

- it will provide a copy of the decision to key personnel involved in news and current affairs, along with an explanation of the decision and directions to ensure that future programs are consistent with the ABA's findings in this matter.

The ABA considers this action addresses the compliance issues raised by the investigation and will continue to monitor the licensee's performance in this regard, particularly in relation to clause 4.3.1 (accuracy of factual material and fair representation of viewpoints).

Decision

The Australian Broadcasting Authority determines for the above reasons that in the broadcast of the 'Welfare Debt Watchdog' segment on the *Today Tonight* program of 3 March 2004, the licensee of ATN, Channel Seven Sydney Pty Ltd:

- breached clause 4.3.1 of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice 1999 by not presenting factual material accurately in describing Mr Whyte as one of Centrelink's highest-ranking officers and a former Chief Fraud Investigator
- did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code as factual material was presented accurately in relation to the claim that Mr Whyte had left Centrelink as he was disgusted by the large number of mistakes;
- breached clause 4.3.1 of the code by not presenting factual material accurately in stating that Centrelink had refused to grant sickness benefits to Mrs [X]
- did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code as viewpoints were represented fairly in the portrayal of a customer's \$35,000 Centrelink debt
- did not breach clause 4.3.1 of the code as viewpoints were represented fairly in relation to the opinions of Mrs [X]'s daughters that their mother's suicide was as a result of Centrelink's continual pressure on her to find a job
- breached clause 4.3.1 of the code as viewpoints were not represented fairly as comment in relation to the suicide allegations were not sought from Centrelink and
- did not breach clause 4.3.11 of the code as the inaccuracies were not significant errors of fact that required correction at the earliest opportunity.

The Common Seal of the
Australian Broadcasting Authority
was affixed to this document in
the presence of:

Signature of Member

Signature of Member/General Manager

Name (please print)

Name (please print)

Dated this 28 day of April 2005.

Appendix A

Today Tonight, 3 March 2004

Transcript of segment entitled 'Welfare debt watchdog'

Naomi Robson: This man is the 'Mr Fixit' of all Centrelink complaints. What a job he's got because hundreds of thousands of furious Australians have been victims. And you'll meet the ex-Centrelink inspector who's joined our team shortly.

Naomi Robson: For years we've been bringing you stories about monumental Centrelink bungles. Bungles that have often left battling Australians thousands of dollars out of pocket. Well now one of Centrelink's highest-ranking officers has come out to expose the mistake-ridden system. But more importantly he wants to help and he's more than willing to take Centrelink head-on. Michelle Tapper has the story.

Rod Whyte: The error rate for Centrelink is extremely high.

Michelle Tapper: This is the man Centrelink fears. Their former Chief Fraud Investigator who knows more about their blunders than they do.

Rod Whyte: In some aspects of Centrelink processing the error rate for Centrelink is 96%.

Michelle Tapper: Rod Whyte worked for Centrelink for 13 years. He quit disgusted by the huge number of mistakes. Now he wants to help hapless victims of this bungling bureaucracy and has spent the past six months analysing their annual reports and external audits.

Rod Whyte: There's various ways that Centrelink makes mistakes, certainly processing, mis-keying information.

Michelle Tapper: By Rod's calculations Centrelink has overpaid \$5.6 Billion during the last 5 years and that means almost 2.5 million people have been lumped with debts owing to Centrelink. And in many of those cases Rod says it was the department's fault in the first place.

Mrs [Y]: Centrelink claims that I have been overpaid \$35,000.

Michelle Tapper: Mrs [Y] is just one of many who've been slapped with a whopping bill from Centrelink. But they tell us she didn't report income while receiving welfare.

Mrs [Y]: Centrelink said not to worry about overpayments seeing that they would be in touch with the Tax Department at the end of every year.

Michelle Tapper: Now they are taking \$100 a fortnight from her salary.

Mrs [Y]: To me the whole situation is a nightmare.

Rod Whyte: Even though it may have been a Centrelink mistake it's still a debt to the Commonwealth that must be repaid back.

Michelle Tapper: [A] and her sisters [B] and [C] are devastated. They believe their mother suicided as a result of Centrelink's continual pressure on her to find a job. Despite medical evidence to prove she was unfit to work because she was chronically depressed.

Daughter of Mrs [X]: They should have actually sent her to a psychiatrist within Centrelink.

Michelle Tapper: Their mother, 55 year-old Mrs [X], became depressed when she lost her job after 25 years at the same biscuit factory.

Daughter of Mrs [X]: She was disoriented, couldn't focus, was very emotional and sometimes crying because of her illness.

Michelle Tapper: Centrelink's solution – they wanted Mrs [X] to take a job in the laundry of a local hospital starting at 2.00am. She declined because of her mental state.

Daughter of Mrs [X]: Just let down, disappointed that such a large company that's meant to help people who have provided 25 years of work for this country have let her down so badly.

Michelle Tapper: Centrelink refused to put Mrs [X] on sickness benefits. Her depression got worse and within 6 months she took her life.

Daughter of Mrs [X]: It had an incredible effect. I mean we've lost our mother. It's very hard to put into words what that's like. Especially because I'm getting married and I'm not going to have my mother there.

Michelle Tapper: Rod Whyte is now investigating how Centrelink handled Mrs [X]'s case.

Rod Whyte: Its an enormous amount of frustration. The anguish and distress.

Michelle Tapper: In a statement to us Centrelink insists, in fact boasts, its accuracy rate is almost 97% and it routinely checks information with other government departments like the Tax Office.

Rod Whyte: Any information you give to Centrelink – you make sure you get a photocopy of information you give and get Centrelink to date stamp it.

Michelle Tapper: And Rod warns more pain is still to come among the 6.3 million Australians on welfare. Which is why he's now wanting to help those who find themselves in trouble through no fault of their own.

Rod Whyte: They have lost their heart. I hope they find it – let me tell you. I hope they find it someday.