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Court challenge - mental patients' education rights

"Today Barrister Robert White will be arguing for the right of mental health patients to have equal access to education as have prisoners" said Justice Action Coordinator Brett Collins.

The four day hearing will begin today in the Administrative Decisions Tribunal, Level 10, John Maddison Tower, 86 Goulburn St, Sydney. Room 10.2 at 10am.

"Speaking from the Forensic Hospital at Long Bay on Friday the patient Saeed Dezfouli said: 'If I was under punishment in a prison cell I would be better treated than I am by the Health Department. They medicate me and have kept me confined for almost ten years. I get one hour a week access to a computer and there is no library. I feel like a vegetable. I wish I was in prison' " reported his primary carer Brett Collins.

"In an interview on Friday the Head of the patient's Treating Team, psychiatrist Tony Mastroianni said he wasn't aware of the patient's requests for a law course or a computer. He said that 'Saeed should ask'. That statement is totally unbelievable, as this court case has been running for four years. It is the Health Department conceding nothing, and fighting this tooth and nail as it would mean having developing people to manage rather than patients to medicate. " said Mr Collins.

"Mr. Dezfouli is a former court interpreter and university graduate. He wants to improve his vocational prospects after leaving the hospital and to study law so he can improve his own legal situation. Education is an internationally recognised right under the UN Covenants to which we are signatories, is important in personal identity, and should not be denied to mental health patients. It is time for the Health Department to show some respect for these citizens" says Mr Collins.

"It is grossly unfair that despite being found notguilty, these patients receive less support than prisoners. These patients are often held for indefinite periods with little opportunity for recovery in maximum security prisons. Education connects them to the outside world, provides mental stimulation and distraction, and improves their chances of rehabilitation. It should be a priority in mental health care" said Mr Collins.

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