



News

Baby boom action plan

Michael Madigan

122 words

10 September 2008

The Courier-Mail

1 - First with the news

3

English

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AUSTRALIA is on the cusp of a baby boom as the Federal Government scrambles to create an action plan to handle the tide of new arrivals.

Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon is expected to launch a discussion paper this morning focused on improving maternity services across Australia.

Australians have returned to high breeding rates after a slowdown from the early 1970s to the early 2000s.

In 2005 267,793 women gave birth to 272,419 babies -- a number only topped by 1971 Australian birth figures.

Ms Roxon's paper is expected to focus on shortages in remote-area maternity services, rising levels of **post natal depression** and maternity workforce challenges.

CML-20080910-1-003-580212

Document COUMAI0020080909e49a00005

The Sydney Morning Herald

News and Features

Figures mask true pregnancy death rate

Julie Robotham Medical Editor

520 words

8 September 2008

The Sydney Morning Herald

First

3

English

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THE number of women who die as a consequence of pregnancy or childbirth may be nearly twice as high as shown in official figures, which capture only one-third of suicides in the year after giving birth, according to NSW analysis that reveals the true toll of **post-natal depression**.

Suicide was the leading cause of death between six weeks and a year after giving birth or having a termination, followed by violence and heart attacks, according to an examination by researchers from the University of NSW of a seven-year period ending in 2001. Each of the 76 deaths during the period was classified as being probably linked - either directly or indirectly - to the recent pregnancy.

"Many of these deaths were among vulnerable women post-pregnancy and are an important group of often preventable deaths," said the leader of the study, Elizabeth Sullivan, from the University's National Perinatal Statistics Unit.

Official statistics only link death with recent pregnancy if it occurs within six weeks of the pregnancy ending - the point at which women are usually discharged from formal maternity services, Associate Professor Sullivan wrote in the Australian And New Zealand Journal Of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

Her findings showed monitoring should continue beyond the six-week period, "in recognition of the ability of modern medical care to delay death following severe complications and of the importance of deaths from mental illness in the year following pregnancy and childbirth". She matched state death records against records of new mothers and found 23 suicides that occurred after six weeks.

In addition to the 76 who died later in the first year, Associate Professor Sullivan found 97 died within six weeks of their pregnancy ending, including 15 who had not been previously recorded in the state's maternal death statistics - probably because doctors did not mention the recent pregnancy on death certificates.

James King, an obstetrician and a past chairman of the National Advisory Committee on Maternal Mortality, said the NSW analysis highlighted inadequacies in Australia's system for recording pregnancy-related deaths.

Professor King said the change in the demographic profile of mothers - who were now more likely to be older, overweight and to have a caesarean section than previous generations - meant accurate surveillance of death and serious ill health was essential. The current system of compiling inconsistent state records into a national report was unreliable.

Monitoring of pregnancy-related deaths has been the responsibility of federal health department agencies, and its future funding is uncertain. In a preface to the most recent national report on the issue, the director of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Penny Allbon, wrote that it was "concerning that no resources have been identified to sustain and improve this reporting in the future".

A professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Australian National University and president of Women's Hospitals Australasia, David Ellwood, said accurate reporting would require statutory powers for investigators to request medical records from state health departments, to independently assess the cause of death.

Document SMHH000020080907e4980000o

Local

Jolie hit by 'post-natal depression'

148 words

4 September 2008

Sydney MX

1 - SYD

5

English

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BABIES ILL

Angelina Jolie may be suffering from **post-natal depression** because her twins have colic.

The Tomb Raider star has not been seen outside her French chateau since the birth of Vivienne and Knox two months ago.

Sources claimed Jolie was exhausted by the sleepless nights and had called in doctors because she was worried her newborns were sick.

The sources said her "mood swings" had been hard on the entire family.

"She has little energy and has to force herself to remember to eat because she is still breast feeding," the insider said.

"She cries at the drop of a hat and laughs at inappropriate times."

Hubby Brad Pitt jetted off to Venice Film Festival with their sons Pax and Maddox last week while Jolie stayed in France with the rest of their brood.

MXS-20080904-1-005-826203

Document NLSYMX0020080904e49400009

News

Interest in centre for parenting problems

KYLIE WILLIAMS

164 words

16 August 2008

The Newcastle Herald

Late

7

English

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HUNTER New England Health Service's perinatal and infant psychiatry unit head Professor Louise Newman would welcome a centre to assist mothers with **post-natal depression** and parenting issues but said there were other services available in the area.

About 20 per cent of mothers will suffer from **post-natal depression**, and up to 80 per cent will have a shorter period of less intense post-baby blues.

Professor Newman, who also works at the University of Newcastle, said there was a **post-natal depression** service at John Hunter Hospital where women could obtain assistance within the hospital and when they returned home.

She said all obstetric units in NSW public hospitals screen women before and after birth for any signs of depression.

But she said there were no centres in Newcastle such as Sydney's Tresillian Family Care Centres where women could receive assistance on a range of parenting issues.

Document NEHR000020080817e48g0000i

Local

Our mum's cruel fate

Ellen Connolly

437 words

10 August 2008

Sunday Telegraph

9 - Metro

15

English

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IT'S a picture of family happiness: new mum Gemma Cant cradles three-month-old baby Audrey as son Ben, 3, looks on proudly.

But what makes this family portrait achingly poignant is that Mrs Cant was in the grip of **post-natal depression**.

Yet nobody knew -- not her husband, her family nor even her doctors.

Just two weeks after the photograph (above) was taken, Gemma, 34, drove off a cliff.

Her death has left her husband of seven years, Douglas, and family struggling to come to terms with shock and grief.

``She was a magnificent mother who adored those children," says her mother, Julie Tindall. ``The thing that has shocked us is that it came about so quickly, without any warning. At Audrey's christening, she was so happy. We shopped for it and planned it. She wanted cupcakes.

``There was nothing to indicate there was turmoil in her."

Gemma Cant is a victim of what experts say is a widespread mental-health problems. Her family took the brave step of telling her story, hoping to bring greater awareness and funding to this stigmatised, debilitating illness.

Doctors believe thousands of Australian women suffer in silence, ashamed to admit they are not coping

and are not ``supermums". Statistics show one-in-10 women are diagnosed with **post-natal depression** (PND), but experts say it is much higher.

Leading researcher Professor Marie-Paule Austin said PND was often difficult to identify because women masked their symptoms.

Gemma Cant was such a woman. A beautiful, intelligent, caring and gentle mother, she was making plans for her family.

She had booked tickets for a Wiggles concert, had professional portraits taken of her children and was excited about renovations to the family home near Newcastle.

The young nurse was also planning her return to work at a doctor's surgery, where she was loved and respected.

The first inkling that she was not well came three days before her death, when she insisted her children were seriously ill and it was her fault.

Doctors and family assured her the children were healthy, but she didn't believe them.

Her family swung into action, devising a plan to keep a watch on her until a scheduled doctor's appointment.

``She'd agreed to move in with us and had brought over the bassinet ...when she took off," Mrs Tindall said.

Gemma's boss, Dr Peter Cooke, said her tragedy showed the desperate need for more facilities like Sydney's Tresillian Family Centres.

For support go to: panda.org.au

STE-20080810-9-015-609231

Document SUNTEL0020080809e48a00038

Local

The tragic face of a hidden condition

ELLEN CONNOLLY

681 words

10 August 2008

Sunday Telegraph

1 - State

14

English

Copyright 2008 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

IT'S a picture of perfect family happiness: new mum Gemma Cant cradles her three-month-old daughter Audrey as her son Ben looks on proudly.

But what makes this family portrait achingly poignant is that the mother of two was in the stranglehold of **post-natal depression**.

Yet nobody knew -- not her husband, her family or her doctors.

Tragically, just two weeks after this photograph was taken, 34-year-old Gemma took her own life by driving her car off a cliff.

Her death has left her husband of seven years and family struggling to come to terms with their shock and grief.

"She was a magnificent mother who adored those children," says Gemma's mother Julie Tindall.

"The thing that has shocked us is that it came about so quickly without any warning.

"At Audrey's christening she was so happy. We shopped for it and planned it. She wanted cupcakes.

"There was nothing to indicate there was turmoil in her."

Gemma Cant is a victim of what medical experts say is one of Australia's most widespread mental health problems. Her family last week took the brave step of telling "Gem's story" in the hope it would bring

greater awareness and government funding to this stigmatised and debilitating illness.

Doctors believe thousands of Australian women are suffering in silence, ashamed to admit they are not coping and are not the supermums that society expects.

While statistics show that one in 10 women are diagnosed with **post-natal depression** (PND), experts say the figure is much higher.

Leading researcher Professor Marie-Paule Austin said PND was often difficult to identify because women masked their symptoms.

Gemma Cant was such a woman.

A beautiful, intelligent, caring and gentle mother, she was making plans for her family.

She had booked tickets for a Wiggles concert, had professional portraits taken of her children and was excited about renovations to the family home near Newcastle.

The young nurse was also planning her return to work at a doctor's surgery, where she was loved and respected by patients and doctors, including Dr Peter Cooke.

The first inkling she was not well occurred just three days before her death, when she became convinced her children were seriously ill and that it was her fault.

Doctors and her family assured her the children were healthy, but she said she didn't believe them.

"These troubled, irrational thoughts only manifested themselves a few days before," Mrs Tindall said.

"I said to Gemma: 'I think you're suffering **post-natal depression**'.

"But she flatly denied it and said: 'Can't you see, the children are ill'."

Her family immediately swung into action, devising a plan to keep a watch on her until a scheduled doctor's appointment.

"She'd agreed to move in with us and had brought over the bassinet and was packing up the kids' clothes with Doug when she took off," Mrs Tindall said.

Gemma left only a note. At her funeral, Dr Cooke tried to help the hundreds of mourners make sense of the incomprehensible.

“If a mother, like Gemma, began to believe she'd done something which harmed her child and made them sick, even though this wasn't true, she would feel such an overwhelming burden of remorse and guilt that she would find it unbearable,” Dr Cooke said.

He and Gemma's family said the tragedy highlighted the desperate need for more facilities similar to Sydney's Tresillian family centres.

Dr Cooke said she was probably suffering PND for some time, but it escalated from depression to post-natal psychosis within days.

Doug hoped his wife's story would encourage women to seek help. “If we can help one family, that would be wonderful,” he said.

The other priority was “to keep Gemma's beautiful spirit alive”.

“We can never stop telling Audrey and Ben what a beautiful and loving person their mum was,” Mrs Tindall said.

For support go to: panda.org.au

STE-20080810-1-014-760311

Document SUNTEL0020080809e48a0009m

Local

Mother's suicide spurs mental health review

Victoria Laurie

300 words

7 August 2008

The Australian

2 - All-round First

2

English

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THE treatment of mental health patients in Western Australia will be reviewed after state Health Minister Jim McGinty acknowledged that "very fundamental issues" had been raised by the death of a mentally ill Perth woman.

Three sisters of Erin Berg, a 39-year-old mother of four who committed suicide in Mexico after being discharged from a Perth mental health unit, met the minister this week to discuss a series of systemic failures they say helped to cause their sister's suicide.

They allege that all facilities treating Berg knew of her detailed suicide plans but failed to act to protect her, and failed to pass on vital information to family members.

Berg, who was suffering **post-natal depression**, died on May 10 after flying to the US-Mexican border town of Tijuana to buy Nembutal, a drug recommended by pro-euthanasia doctor Philip Nitschke as offering "a fast, peaceful and pain-free death".

"It was a tragic case and I think I've now got a good understanding of what transpired," Mr McGinty told The Australian after a meeting with Berg's sisters. "The case has raised a number of very fundamental issues relating to patient privacy and the circumstances when that ought to be breached."

The minister said draft provisions of the state's new Mental Health Act would be reviewed "in light of the Erin Berg experience".

He had directed the state's chief psychiatrist to investigate Berg's treatment by a mental health clinic that had allowed her to travel without supervision while under a community treatment order.

Mr McGinty said the investigation would examine the steps taken to ensure Berg's safety, and why family members had not been consulted.

AUS-20080807-2-002-792976

Document AUSTLN0020080806e4870005I

Local

Suicide prompts review

Victoria Laurie

203 words

7 August 2008

The Australian

1 - All-round Country

2

English

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Berg, who was suffering **post-natal depression**, died on May 10 after flying to Tijuana to buy euthanasia drug Nembutal.

"It was a tragic case and I think I've now got a good understanding of what transpired," Mr McGinty told The Australian. "The case has raised a number of very fundamental issues relating to patient privacy and the circumstances when that ought to be breached." He said draft provisions of the state's new Mental Health Act would be reviewed in light of the case.

AUS-20080807-1-002-597819

Document AUSTLN0020080806e4870000o



News

Mums to get their own midwives

103 words

4 August 2008

The Courier-Mail

1 - First with the news

12

English

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NEW mums will have access to one-on-one midwifery support from early in their pregnancies until the first few weeks of motherhood under a plan to improve regional maternity services.

Hospitals in Ipswich, Logan and Charleville will trial the model, aimed at cutting the number of mums who had to travel to larger centres for pre and post-birth support services.

Health Minister Stephen Robertson, pictured, said the program would help lower the incidence of **post-natal depression** and result in fewer post-birth hospital admissions for mothers. Rosemary Odgers

CML-20080804-1-012-891912

Document COUMAI0020080803e4840000j

Karitane help for mums

252 words

30 July 2008

Fairfield Advance

1 - MB

11

English

Copyright 2008 News Ltd. All Rights Reserved

PREGNANT women and mothers who are experiencing **post natal depression** and anxiety now have a purpose-built centre in Carramar that they can turn to for support after the \$4.5 million redevelopment of Karitane was unveiled last Friday.

Karitane is a renowned source of information and assistance for parents with newborns.

Its new facilities include a purpose-built **post natal depression** unit, education and research facilities and toddler clinic and outreach centre. State Health Minister, Cabramatta MP Reba Meagher, officially opened the new facilities on Friday.

She said families who were experiencing difficulties would benefit immensely from the centre.

“The new facilities will help Karitane staff support mothers in a safe, friendly and homely environment to give families the best possible start in life,” she said.

Naomi Laplain, who suffered depression and anxiety after the birth of her first child, said if it wasn't for the support of staff at Karitane she wouldn't have coped with the birth of her second child.

“While everyone thinks pregnancy is a time of happiness and joy, having suffered **post natal depression** I didn't have any connection with my baby at all,” she said. “However once I started at Karitane I could see the light at the end of the tunnel and I am eternally grateful.”

Mrs Laplain said the facility was an enormous boost for mothers in the area who were experiencing similar problems.

For more information about Karitane phone 9794 2300.

FAG-20080730-1-011-214011

Document FAIRAD0020080801e47u0000w

Local

Coroner to probe depressed woman's suicide in Mexico

Paige Taylor

553 words

28 July 2008

The Australian

2 - All-round First

5

English

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WEST Australian coroner Alastair Hope will investigate the alleged failures that allowed mother-of-four Erin Berg to leave a secure mental health ward in Perth to commit suicide in Mexico using Nembutal, the veterinary drug advocated by pro-euthanasia doctor Philip Nitschke.

Mr Hope's office has confirmed he has agreed to investigate the circumstances surrounding Berg's death.

Mr Hope has asked West Australian police to provide information about events leading up to her death before he decides whether to hold a public inquest.

The Australian has learnt that the Mental Health Review Board had not yet received the hospital report prepared for it about Berg, who was severely depressed when it voted to release her from care in March, three weeks before she carried out her known plan to fly to Mexico and kill herself with Nembutal.

The report by King Edward Memorial Hospital's mother-baby unit, obtained by The Australian, indicated the 39-year-old should remain an involuntary patient.

It described how hospital staff discovered Berg's suicide plan, inspired by Dr Nitschke's book *Killing Me Softly*, when they found an overdue library slip for the book and a flight itinerary for Tijuana among Berg's belongings in the ward.

Berg told staff the plan was old, but she was caught hiding travellers cheques under her mattress the day

before her release. "We continue to have concerns about her risk to herself," the report stated. "At this stage, we feel that Erin does meet the criteria for involuntary treatment."

But the West Australian Mental Health Review Board told Berg's three sisters last week the report did not arrive in time for their meeting about Berg on March 31.

Instead the board heard from report author Mojdeh Bassiri and from Berg, who argued successfully to have her involuntary status at the hospital lifted.

Berg discharged herself the following day and three weeks later told the clinic monitoring her she was going "down south" for a holiday. In fact, she flew to Mexico, where she bought and swallowed Nembutal, the drug not freely available in Australia but described by Dr Nitschke as "the best".

She was found unconscious in a hotel and died two weeks later on May 10, leaving four children aged one, five, seven and nine.

Berg's sisters say her death was all the more tragic because it was preventable. They believe she would have recovered from her **post-natal depression**, given time and the right care.

Berg's sister, Sally Doyle, said Western Australia's mental health system ignored several red flags, and she wants reform to prevent a repeat of what she claims are systemic failures that allowed Berg to travel to Tijuana to fulfil her deathwish.

Mental Health Review Board president Murray Allen told The Australian he had no comment to make about Berg's case or the board's handling of it.

But West Australian Health Minister Jim McGinty, who is the state Attorney-General, has agreed to meet Berg's sisters to hear their concerns. The Mental Health Review Board met the sisters on Thursday to explain its decision to change her status after the story appeared in The Weekend Australian Magazine.

AUS-20080728-2-005-513452

Document AUSTLN0020080727e47s0000f

Local

Response over suicide

Paige Taylor

421 words

22 July 2008

The Australian

7 - NSW First

6

English

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AUTHORITIES who allowed Erin Berg to leave the Perth mental health unit where she was an involuntary patient, despite evidence the mother of four planned to kill herself in Mexico with the veterinary drug Nembutal, are poised to give her grieving family a rare explanation of their actions.

Berg, who was suffering **post-natal depression**, died on May 10 in Tijuana, two weeks after flying to the US-Mexican border town to buy Nembutal, which pro-euthanasia doctor Philip Nitschke has recommended as "a fast, peaceful and pain-free death".

Her children were aged one, five, seven and nine.

Her sisters Sally, Chris and Stephanie Doyle say a series of failures led to the 39-year-old's lingering death less than six weeks after her release on April 1 from the mother-baby unit at King Edward Memorial Hospital.

Following an account of Berg's death in The Weekend Australian Magazine on July 12, the usually secretive Mental Health Review Board has agreed to discuss Berg's case with her family this week.

Sally Doyle says that on March 20, 11 days before Berg's release, mother-baby unit staff discovered among her belongings a travel itinerary for Mexico, a passport application and an overdue library slip for Dr Nitschke's book Killing Me Softly.

“We have learned that Erin admitted to staff that she had a plan to go to Mexico to ‘euthanase’ herself but told them she no longer had that plan,” Ms Doyle told The Australian.

But on March 31, the day before Berg was released, she was found trying to hide travellers’ cheques.

Three weeks after her release, the Alma St Clinic managing her case allowed her to go on a holiday “down south”, but she went to Mexico.

“The mother-baby unit, to their credit, made every attempt to alert staff at the Alma St Clinic of their anxiety at the high risk for Erin,” Ms Doyle said. “In written summaries sent to Alma St Clinic reference was made to ‘ongoing suicidal thoughts’, ‘secretive’ behaviour, the fact Erin had been ‘misrepresentative of the truth’, and also provided lengthy verbal handovers where the high suicidal risk was underlined.”

Mental Health Review Board president Murray Allen initially declined to tell Berg’s sisters why she was released, citing the Mental Health Act.

But after a flurry of emails and publicity about the case, Justice Murray has invited Berg’s sisters to meet him and board members.

AUS-20080722-7-006-678781

Document AUSTLN0020080721e47m0006q

Local

Answers for suicide woman's family

Paige Taylor

341 words

22 July 2008

The Australian

1 - All-round Country

7

English

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AUTHORITIES who allowed Erin Berg to leave the Perth mental health unit where she was an involuntary patient, despite evidence the mother of four planned to kill herself in Mexico with the veterinary drug Nembutal, are poised to give her grieving family a rare explanation of their actions.

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“The mother-baby unit, to their credit, made every attempt to alert staff at the Alma St Clinic of their anxiety at the high risk for Erin,” Ms Doyle said.

AUS-20080722-1-007-297938

Document AUSTLN0020080721e47m0003n



PND support for mums

125 words

21 July 2008

Sunshine Coast Daily

Main

41

English

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IF you have had a child in the last 12 months and feel you are having difficulty adapting to motherhood, or have been diagnosed with **post-natal depression**, come along to the PND Support Group program.

The group will start with an eight-week program aimed at providing you with information about PND and providing practical ways to reduce symptoms of depression.

There is no need to suffer alone. Come along for a coffee and receive support and friendship from other women.

There is no childcare, but participants are welcome to bring along their baby.

For details and enrolment on the next course, contact Lisa Lindley on 0417540820.

Document APNSCD0020080720e471000jj

General

Depression claim in baby's death

ROY GIBSON

385 words

16 July 2008

The West Australian

Second

5

English

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A mother allegedly smothered her one-month-old son with a pillow while in the depths of **post-natal depression**, Perth Magistrate's Court was told yesterday.

Rebecca Doreen Morley, 39, of Leederville, had been on anti-depressants for six or seven years but stopped the medication to become pregnant through the IVF program, lawyer Lawrie Levy said.

But her mental state deteriorated from **post-natal depression** and building anxiety after the birth of son Frederick.

Details of the death were revealed yesterday when Mr Levy applied successfully for bail for Ms Morley, who has been under psychiatric care at Graylands Hospital for four weeks since her baby died.

She is charged with doing grievous bodily harm to her son but Mr Levy told the court it was likely the Director of Public Prosecutions would change the charge to infanticide, which has a maximum sentence of seven years jail.

Mr Levy said Ms Morley married about three years ago and weaned herself off anti-depressants for the pregnancy.

He said she had **post-natal depression** after the birth at St John of God Hospital and went to live with her mother on the family farm but her mental health deteriorated.

The day before the alleged offence, Ms Morley intended to see a psychiatrist and her brother, a doctor, prescribed an anti-depressant for her.

Sgt Andy Elliott, prosecuting, opposed bail. He said Ms Morley had “murdered” her baby by putting a pillow over his face and then told her husband what she did. He suggested four weeks in Graylands was insufficient for her to recover from her problems.

But Magistrate Joe Randazza rebuked Sgt Elliot for his comments and said Ms Morley was not charged with murder.

He said he preferred the view of the Graylands psychiatrist that Ms Morley was fit to stand trial and was not a risk to the community.

Mr Randazza said Ms Morley allegedly smothered her baby when she was “tired, confused and perplexed”. Also, there were issues as to her wellbeing around the time of the baby’s delivery and post-delivery.

He released her on \$10,000 bail with surety. She must continue to be treated at Graylands and, if discharged, she must reside with her brother in Nedlands.

Document TWAU000020080715e47g0004d

News

Family wants better review

295 words

14 July 2008

Geelong Advertiser

1 - Main

6

English

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MENTAL health professionals should not be blamed for the suicide of 39-year old mother-of-four Erin Berg, West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter said yesterday.

Ms Berg, who suffered from **post natal depression**, died in Mexico in May two weeks after taking the horse tranquilliser Nembutal, her family says.

They claim the WA Mental Health Review Board approved her release in to the community, despite knowing she had travel plans for Mexico and an overdue notice from the library for Dr Philip Nitschke's book Killing Me Softly.

Mr Carpenter, who is being lobbied by Ms Berg's family to review mental health procedures, says it's unfair to condemn people.

``It's very sad and I think it's always unwise to retrospectively leap to judgments about what people should or should not have done," Mr Carpenter said yesterday.

``I'm sure that the people managing her case are searching their own minds about what might have been done to prevent this from happening."

Ms Berg's sister, Sally Doyle, said the process for reviewing people's status needed to be changed, so the same thing didn't happen to other families.

``There were key points at which the mental health services failed to provide a competent service to Erin," Ms Doyle said.

“One of those was the Mental Health Review Board going against the expressed assessment of the treating doctors . . . (to) take her off involuntary status.

“It quite literally opened the door for Erin to leave and get on a plane to Mexico.”

Ms Doyle is also angry at Philip Nitschke, because phrases from his book *Killing Me Softly* appeared almost word for word in her sister's suicide notes, she says.

GAT-20080714-1-006-662869

Document GEEADV0020080714e47e0005z

National

Health professionals backed

wire

210 words

14 July 2008

Northern Territory News/Sunday Territorian

1 -

9

English

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PERTH: Mental health professionals should not be blamed for the suicide of 39-year old mother-of-four Erin Berg, WA Premier Alan Carpenter said yesterday.

Ms Berg (pictured), who suffered from **post natal depression**, died in Mexico in May, two weeks after taking horse tranquilliser Nembutal.

Her family claims the WA Mental Health Review Board approved her release in to the community despite knowing she had travel plans for Mexico and an overdue notice from the library for Dr Philip Nitschke's book Killing Me Softly.

Mr Carpenter, who is being lobbied by Ms Berg's family to review mental health procedures, says it's unfair to condemn people.

``It's very sad and I think it's always unwise to retrospectively leap to judgments about what people should or should not have done," Mr Carpenter said. ``I'm sure that the people managing her case are searching their own minds about what might have been done to prevent this from happening."

Ms Berg's sister Sally Doyle says the process for reviewing people's status needs to be changed.

``There were key points at which the mental health services failed to provide service to Erin," Ms Doyle said.

NTN-20080714-1-009-938712

Document NORTH0020080714e47e0006c

Local

Family battles to unlock secrets of sister's suicide

Victoria Laurie

527 words

12 July 2008

The Australian

1 - All-round Country

11

English

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THE family of a Perth mother-of-four who travelled overseas to commit suicide after being discharged from a mental health unit have appealed to West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter to find out why their sister was allowed to leave protective care.

Erin Berg died in the Mexican border town of Tijuana on May 10, two weeks after swallowing Nembutal, a barbiturate permitted only for veterinary use in Australia. The 39-year-old mother had been suffering from severe **post-natal depression** after the birth of her fourth child.

Berg was involuntarily admitted to the mother-baby unit at Perth's King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women in February, after her family raised concern for her welfare.

She was discharged after six weeks, with the only requirement being that she be regularly monitored by a mental health clinic.

Three weeks later, she secretly boarded a plane to Mexico. On April 28, she was discovered, blue and barely breathing, in a motel room. Two of her sisters flew to Tijuana where, on May 10, Berg died in Hospital Angeles.

Berg's sister Sally Doyle said the family later learnt that *Killing Me Softly*, a book by pro-euthanasia doctor Philip Nitschke, and an itinerary for flights to Mexico had been found in her belongings in the mother-baby unit. Berg had also admitted to unit staff that she had considered flying to Mexico to die.

Ms Doyle said Berg should not have been discharged. "We watched our sister die horribly in a foreign hospital, when she should have remained in supervised care until she got better."

But their request for details relating to her discharge as an involuntary patient has been denied under the state's Mental Health Act, which is currently under review.

"I feel that we've been gagged from speaking out about a tragedy that shouldn't have hit our family," Ms Doyle said.

In a letter to Mr Carpenter, Ms Doyle said the family was shocked by "an absolute lack of transparency and accountability" in the treatment of mental health patients. "It did not serve the interests of Erin when she was alive, and most certainly does not serve her interests or that of the family now she is dead," she said.

Ann White, the executive officer of the WA Association for Mental Health, said less than 5 per cent of reviewed patients were discharged from an involuntary order.

"It would be a surprise if a person who has demonstrated suicidal ideation is released from an involuntary order, which is aimed at safeguarding their welfare and that of the community," she said.

She said the agency had lobbied the state Government since 2003 about the need for an internal complaints procedure and written reasons for decisions.

The Doyle family is also lobbying federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland to ban Dr Nitschke's pro-euthanasia book, which they say influenced their sister in her decision to go to Mexico and buy the drug he recommended for "a peaceful death".

When Erin Berg chose to die -- The Weekend Australian Magazine

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Magazine

WHEN ERIN BERG CHOSE TO DIE

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In the grip of **post-natal depression**, this woman took her life with Nembutal, a drug championed by euthanasia advocates. But her death was far from an "easy way out". Victoria Laurie reports.

Erin Berg had her death all mapped out - a peaceful end in a quiet hideaway, far from the place where she had spiralled into deep **post-natal depression**. Mentally ill but suffering no terminal illness, the mother of four had planned the kind of quick, certain exit she'd read about in books. Yet Erin's bid for oblivion turned out to be a slow descent into hell, with her three sisters following her each step of the way but the last, terminal one.

Winter gusts blow yellowing leaves around the yard outside as Sally, Chris and Stephanie Doyle huddle around an electric fire in Chris's small Fremantle flat. The three women are emotionally shattered; so, they say, are Erin's children, aged from one to nine, and the children's father, Norman Berg.

The failure of mental health services to successfully treat 39-year-old Erin's severe depression had been bad enough. So was the fact that she had been free to leave Australia while still a supervised patient under the Mental Health Act.

But the worst part, the sisters say, was that Erin had gone down a path marked out by pro-euthanasia campaigner Dr Philip Nitschke, the author of several books on suicide such as *Killing Me Softly: Voluntary Euthanasia And The Road To The Peaceful Pill* and *The Peaceful Pill Handbook*. That "pill" was obtainable in Mexico and would lead to a "reliable" death, he'd written. Yet Erin's suicide bid had led to a slow, frightening end in a Tijuana hospital, horrific events that two of her sisters would witness. Now the sisters are speaking out in the hope others will learn from their experience.

Photos of Erin are scattered on the floor amid coffee cups and piles of documents. "Erin was the prettiest one, the most normal one," says oldest sister Sally, pointing to a picture of a tallish woman with a wry smile. "She had beautiful clothes and make-up, while the rest of us were a bit left of field."

The siblings were always close and followed each other into similar professions - Sally, Stephanie and Chris as social workers, and Erin as an occupational therapist. Choosing caring jobs was no coincidence; they'd all survived a tough childhood at home.

"We've always looked out for each other," explains Chris. "When we were kids, Mum had a brain aneurism and was very sick. Then she had cognitive problems, so it was up to us to raise ourselves." There was also domestic violence at home; eventually, their mother left with her children.

The sisters wonder if that's why Erin strove so hard for a perfect family life when she married Norman. "She had the white-picket-fence image of what she should be," says Chris.

Erin's gentle manner belied her steely determination. "She was very anti medical intervention, and felt doctors had taken over childbirth, so she had four home births," says Sally. Erin raised goats in the backyard for the best milk to feed her first three children, Emily, now nine, Jack, seven, and five-year-old Jane.

How To Raise Your Children Without Smacking and Twelve Steps To Being Happy sat on her bookshelves. There was a hint of dreamy escapism, too; Erin was addicted to Dr Phil's homespun TV counselling and "any show with Tom Cruise in it - she adored him", says Sally.

And then the dream crumbled. A photo from Stephanie's wedding in October 2006 shows a happy scene - Sally and Chris flank the radiant bride; to the left, Sally's partner Noela Cerutti hugs Anne Doyle, the girls' mother. On the far left is Erin, dressed in black, pensive and looking oddly out of place.

"She knew on that day that she was pregnant with her fourth child, but she hadn't told any of us," Sally explains. "And she was already separated from Norman." The marriage had been tested by Erin's bouts of depression; Elizabeth was born in March last year, but Erin and Norman continued to live apart. They agreed to share the children's care, but Erin struggled as **post-natal depression** crept up on her. It was hard mustering energy to cook meals, and the house was strewn with dirty nappies.

Says Chris: "She picked me up from the airport when I'd been away and she said, 'Things are spinning out, Chris. I've let everything go, I've messed things up.' Every day we'd say, 'There's counselling, we'll mind the kids, go and do some laps of the pool.'

"I can remember having lively academic debates with Erin about the whole idea of euthanasia. By February [this year], she was saying, 'If I was a dog, you'd put me down', and 'An Australian doctor says everyone has the right to euthanise themselves.' She'd say, 'Do you want me to have a painful, harrowing death?'"

Erin was seriously unwell. "Once her depression kicked in, she thought it was never going to shift," says Chris. "We'd all worked in the field and recognised the symptoms of severe clinical depression. We were scared shitless."

Sally, who lives in Brisbane, flew to Perth in February to support her sisters. "We went into lockdown to get her to admit she needed help," she says. Erin reluctantly agreed to enter the mother-baby unit at King Edward Memorial Hospital for Women, but checked out a day later.

Within days, her distress was so great that the sisters rang again for help. A psychiatrist and nurse arrived, saw the state of the house and realised the problem. "They said to Erin, 'Either you go with your sisters in the car or we call the police,'" says Sally. "It was just awful."

Erin was angry; admitted as an involuntary patient to the mother-baby unit, she cut short phone calls and visits by family members. At a meeting attended by a psychiatrist, her estranged husband and her three sisters, it was explained that Erin had requested no information be passed to her family. The sisters were told to "step back" and allow the unit to take care of Erin and her baby.

"You can't be her social workers," unit staff told them. Reluctantly, the siblings agreed, but they worried that Erin might be prematurely discharged.

spring-cleaning Erin's house while she was in hospital, Sally, Chris and Stephanie were further concerned to find a book she'd borrowed from the library: *Killing Me Softly* by Australian doctor Philip Nitschke, published in 2005.

For 25 years, Nitschke has campaigned for laws that would permit suffering individuals to end their own life; in 1996, under the short-lived Rights Of The Terminally Ill Act of the Northern Territory, he became - in his own words - "the first doctor in the world to administer a legal, lethal voluntary injection". After the NT law was overturned, Nitschke turned to writing about voluntary euthanasia: "In *Killing Me Softly*, I take a different, more controversial approach by exploring the role of DIY technologies. I investigate how new and readily obtainable methods can provide people with real end-of-life choices."

A second book in 2007, *The Peaceful Pill Handbook*, was banned from publication last year after the Film and Literature Classification review board deemed it "instructs in the crime of the manufacture of barbiturates". There is no evidence that Erin had seen a copy of this book - although her sisters believe she may have read it online.

Nitschke is a keen advocate of one particular drug, the barbiturate Nembutal. Although prohibited in Australia (where only vets may use it to euthanise animals), Nitschke's organisation Exit International sees it as "a drug that guarantees the person who takes it a peaceful and reliable death". On TV's *Four Corners* last year, Nitschke said: "I've never seen anyone drink a bottle of this drug and finish their whisky. That's all you need. One bottle."

In *Killing Me Softly*, he addresses critics who accuse him of exploiting vulnerable minds. He notes that even among his supporters, 40 per cent expressed concerns that such drugs "might fall into the wrong hands - perhaps those of a mentally ill person or troubled teen".

"Indeed, there are risks associated with the 'peaceful pill'," he conceded. "But does that mean we shouldn't proceed? I think not."

Erin's sisters were struck by the book's instructive, confident tone. "It mentions liquid Nembutal as a drug which offers a peaceful and reliable death," says Sally. "It identifies Mexico as a place to source it - over the counter at veterinary supply stores."

Although alarmed, the women were not surprised Erin was reading the book. Pro-euthanasia arguments were not new to them, nor totally abhorrent when it came to dying patients. "As workers in the health system, we see people all the time who can't be fixed," says Sally. "We're in touch with the arguments about euthanasia - we aren't against it per se."

They could even understand Erin's attraction to Nitschke's promise of a "painless" and "reliable" death. Explains Sally: "Erin had worked at Graylands [psychiatric hospital in Perth] and seen people who were badly injured after failed suicide attempts."

But Erin was not terminally ill. She needed medical care, not a quick exit - and the sisters were determined to help her recover from her depression.

After six weeks as an involuntary patient in the mother-baby unit, Erin appeared before the Mental Health Review Board, whose function is to decide whether a patient continues on an involuntary order. The next day, Erin was discharged home. She was released on a community treatment order, which required her

to be regularly monitored by a mental health clinic at Fremantle Hospital.

Later, the sisters would discover that a Nitschke book and an itinerary for flights to Mexico had been found in her belongings in the mother-baby unit. When questioned about the items, she had admitted to earlier considering flying to Mexico to be euthanised.

The board gave no reason for its decision. Under the Mental Health Act, which is under review in Western Australia, it is not required to give its reasons, even to the treating team or a patient's family. When Erin left the unit with baby Elizabeth, only Norman - as the child's parent, and carer for the other three - was notified of her release and of the travel itinerary. "When I took Erin to her home, I questioned her," Norman Berg says. "She said, 'I just asked the travel agent for a quote, but I'm not going to do it.' I suppose a big part of me wanted to believe that she wouldn't do it."

Erin also told case workers who visited her from the Fremantle Hospital clinic that she'd abandoned her suicide plan. She avoided her sisters, and they in turn - once they found out she was discharged - decided to give Erin time to settle back home. They had no inkling of Erin's suspicious travel plans; "I assumed they'd been told," Norman said.

Three weeks after her release, Erin got permission from the mental health clinic to go on holiday alone "down south" for a week. Instead, on April 21, she suddenly turned up at Norman's home, handed him Elizabeth and told him she was taking a short holiday to Los Angeles. Her sisters knew of her plans, she said, and would pick up her mail. Erin had fooled everybody.

Twelve hours later, she left the country. Instead of travelling to LA, she took a flight via Tokyo to Tijuana, Mexico, where she booked into a hotel and then walked down the street to a pet supply shop. She bought a bottle identical to the one displayed in *Killing Me Softly*, a 100ml dose of Nembutal.

Several days later, in her hotel room, she drank the bottle's contents with a bottle of whisky. As Nitschke recommended in chapter eight of *Killing Me Softly*, she left letters saying, "No one else was involved in this, it was my choice ... to euthanise myself." While Nitschke stated his book was "not a how-to-die manual", the Doyle sisters would later argue that Erin had viewed it precisely in those terms.

On April 28, Erin was discovered by hotel staff on the floor, blue and barely breathing. She had taken the drug earlier that day or late the night before, but it hadn't killed her.

The call came on May 1 that Erin was in a coma in Tijuana and had suspected brain damage. The next day, Sally, her partner Noela and Chris boarded a plane for Mexico. On the long flight over, their minds

were in turmoil. How could someone with a clear suicide plan not have been kept as an involuntary patient? And how could Philip Nitschke have made such statements about a so-called "reliable" death? Says Chris: "Erin discovered the hard way that words in a book do not always fit with the real world."

Another rude shock would confront the women in Mexico. They discovered that Tijuana, a border town between Mexico and the US, is a drugtrafficking capital where violence erupts daily. Two days before Erin's suicide bid, street battles between warring drug gangs had caused eight deaths and countless injuries. Inside Hospital General de Tijuana, military men stood nursing machine guns.

No such dangers were explained in Nitschke's books or on his website, even though he had visited Tijuana several times and claimed 200 supporters had already made the trip to Mexico for life-ending drugs.

Perhaps he assumed that every purchaser of such drugs would bring them home to die, although doing so involves the risk of a lengthy prison sentence for possessing a prohibited drug (except for vets).

Two months before Erin's death, Nitschke had accompanied 78-year-old mesothelioma sufferer Don Flounders and his wife, Iris, to Tijuana. With his assistance, Nitschke claimed, the couple had "bought, then smuggled, the lethal drug Nembutal back into Australia". (Federal police would later raid the Flounders' house, but found no drug.)

Nitschke's candid disclosure was contained in a media release he issued upon returning to Australia. It advertised a forthcoming workshop from his voluntary euthanasia foundation, Exit International, outlining "the latest news from Mexico" on drug options.

"Most often, people who attend our meetings are of a generation who have witnessed parents, partners and friends die, some of them horribly," he wrote. "Our workshops provide an outline of peaceful, reliable and obtainable options."

What the Doyles confronted in Tijuana couldn't have been more different. Simply being there was dangerous. "When we got to the hospital," says Sally, "we had to get through three armed checkpoints and negotiate with stressed staff and guards just to see our sister." They found an unconscious Erin in the intensive care unit, her chest heaving from a poorly synchronised lifesupport machine. In one of three intensive care beds, a convicted kidnapper lay with an open wound where his left leg had been amputated.

Barely anyone spoke English; the sisters waved notes in Spanish written for them by sympathetic hotel

staff. The hospital was filthy; the women watched in horror as intensive care nurses tended a patient and then, without washing their hands, moved to the next bed.

Sally and Chris say they wondered how any thinking person could suggest Australians go to a Third World country with a struggling health system - and a strong Catholic antipathy to suicide - to obtain their "peaceful pill". People seeking death might not care about guns, poor hospitals and anti-euthanasia laws - except when things go wrong, as they did for Erin.

Erin's condition worsened by the hour; her lungs became infected and a tracheotomy - a surgical opening of the windpipe - was performed so she could breathe better. The sisters had agreed that if Erin's condition seemed hopeless, they would ask for life support to be turned off.

But that was the next shock. Nitschke's book didn't mention that Mexican law prohibits doctors from ceasing treatment, even in the event of no brain function. "The doctors told us they could only withdraw a feeding tube, and then it could take weeks for her to die," says Chris.

On Tuesday, May 6, eight days after her overdose, Erin opened her eyes. The next day, she seemed to be trying to talk. "We thought, 'Oh my God, she's still here, it hasn't killed her,'" says Chris. "We said, 'Erin, we're moving you to a better hospital' and she nodded vigorously and clearly." Chris shakes her head sadly. "She looked terrified to wake up where she was. I wouldn't wish that look on anyone."

The private Hospital Angeles down the road agreed to take Erin. But on the day she was due to be moved, a nurse yelled for security. "All these twitchy-fingered guards looked up and stopped us from leaving for two hours," recalls Chris. The problem was money. "We had already handed over \$US1000 (\$1040) but they refused to let Erin go until the correct receipt proved it."

If Tijuana's Hospital General had been like downtown Beirut, the Angeles was safer - but expensive. The sisters were told their bill would be \$US35,000 a week, plus medication; should Erin survive, it could cost up to \$US250,000 to get her medically evacuated to Australia.

"We'd brought \$US80,000 with us but we were terrified the money would run out," says Sally. "Each morning, we were forced to clear Erin's bill of over \$US8000 per day. If not, we were told she would be taken straight back to what we called 'hell hospital'."

The Australian Embassy in Mexico City passed on contact details for a translator and arranged for a visitor pass into the intensive care unit. That was the limit of help they could offer, the women were told; financial help was out of the question. The sisters asked embassy staff to negotiate a delay in hospital

payments in order to give them time to sell assets in Australia. "We never heard back," says Chris.

Sally's partner, Noela, was so furious at their dilemma she fired off an email to Nitschke's Darwin-based organisation, Exit International. "I am truly horrified at the information you make so freely available on your internet and also in Nitschke-published books, especially *Killing Me Softly*," she wrote. "You have a massive responsibility to ensure your message gets to the right people and is not reinterpreted by people who are sad, isolated or mentally ill."

Nitschke responded two days later: "I am sorry to hear of the tragic details you describe. You may not be aware that we had some contact with Erin and advised her that there was no information we could provide and that our organisation was not appropriate for her issues."

As for his book, it was freely available and "details the philosophy behind the voluntary euthanasia issue", he wrote. "It is used as a reference text in some school courses and is in no way a 'how-to' guide." Nitschke concluded that "we trust there will be some peaceful resolution to Erin's situation".

Erin died a few hours after his message arrived. It was May 10, Mother's Day in Mexico. "We were still madly doing things, but at four that afternoon I got a funny feeling that I had to get back to the hospital," says Chris.

"I went in and wished her a happy Mother's Day. I said the Lord's prayer over her and said, 'This sucks, Erin. If you have to go, you can go. Meet me at six by the pool for a bourbon and we'll have a drink together.' I left, and she died just after six o'clock." The struggle had been too much for a body fighting a huge overdose and infection. There was no autopsy. Says Sally: "We know what killed her."

The days after Erin's death were so macabre, the sisters now laugh grimly at what they endured in Mexico. "After gun battles and watching your sister dying in a Third-World country, it was all up from there," quips Sally. Erin's body was taken to an undertaker's morgue that was "all blood and shit on the walls". The indignity of having her body left in the hearse for hours was followed by the sight of an attendant trying to jam Erin's torso into a narrow mortuary fridge. "We decided she wasn't going to spend even a night in there."

They found a compassionate funeral director in Hector Quintero Garcia, who let them bathe and dress their dead sister. They sat quietly with her for a few hours before a priest arrived to bless her body.

Meanwhile, the funeral director was horrified to learn Erin's story. "You mean people are coming here to kill themselves?" he asked in disbelief. The reaction was similar when Tijuana's mayor, Jorge Ramos

Hernandez, sent his chief adviser, Gabriela Morgado Cabuto, to meet the Doyle sisters.

The adviser was moved by their story and made several more visits to help the sisters. But who, she asked, was this Australian doctor who was suggesting their city was Suicide Central?

The mayoral office would later issue this statement: "At this particular moment, Tijuana is in an intense war against organised crime, a war that has already cost the life of eight policemen. And now, we found out that a doctor is promoting euthanasia, publishing books, putting adds [sic] on the internet and giving conferences where he advertises our city as a place for suicide."

The same statement points out that Tijuana authorities are powerless to bar entry to Australians visiting "with the purpose of ending their life, [e]specially because when they are questioned at the immigration checkpoint, the obvious answer is probably that they are here as tourists".

While waiting to take Erin's body home, the sisters and Noela sprang into action. "[There's] nothing like a bunch of pissed-off social workers," says Chris wryly. Using Noela's laptop, they drew up a flyer which hotel staff helped them translate into Spanish. Marked "Atencion!" and bearing a photo of Erin's empty Nembutal bottle, the flyer warned of Australians arriving in Tijuana with a death wish.

Back home, Sally and Noela sent floods of emails to politicians. "I began to feel murderously angry," says Sally, who feels Erin's case raises serious questions about the treatment of mentally ill patients. Why had Erin's main carers - her sisters - not been warned of the danger surrounding her travel plans? And why had Erin been released despite such warning signs? "There's one department going, 'Danger, danger' and another saying, 'It's fine if you leave'," says Sally. "Erin just walked between the gaps."

Yet much of the sisters' anger is directed at Nitschke and his pro-euthanasia publications. "Depression is such a common thing that it's just not good enough to have a few lines of disclaimer in the front of his book," says Sally. "He discounts the risk to people like Erin." They have written to federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland and asked for *Killing Me Softly* to be banned in the same way that Nitschke's other book, *The Peaceful Pill*, is banned from public sale. They are awaiting a response.

Nitschke has told *The Weekend Australian Magazine* that he never met Erin and bore no responsibility for her death. She was not allowed to join Exit International or attend workshops, which are restricted to "people aged 50 years or over with no psychiatric condition and who are terminally ill".

His first book "carries no information of practical assistance to anyone wanting to end his or her life," he says. And Erin must have obtained some other drug - "If she had consumed pentobarbital [the chemical

name for Nembutal], she would have died peacefully and quickly." As for violence in Tijuana, he saw no evidence of a city under siege.

Sally Doyle says the bottle found by her sister's side, identical to ones shown in Nitschke's books, "says it all". What killed her was severe depression, failures by the mental health system and Nitschke's how-to-die information, she says.

"Given the terrible outcome that resulted from our sister referring to Nitschke's book, we want the other chapter written to explain that her death was neither reliable nor dignified, and there was never the remotest possibility of a 'peaceful resolution'." J

Children's names have been changed.

Lifeline 13 11 14 or SANE Helpline 1800 18 SANE (7263)

Staff writer Victoria Laurie's previous story was "On the whitefellas' road" (June 14-15), about Aboriginal artists on the Canning Stock Route.

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