

# Official report into boy's death in rural Australia covers up underlying causes

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28 March 2002

An Australian Communications Authority (ACA) report into the February 6 death of 10-year-old Sam Boulding has proved to be an exercise in damage control aimed at taking the tragic incident out of the public spotlight. Communications Minister Richard Alston ordered the ACA investigation on February 14, but only after coverage of the child's death persisted in the media.

Sam Boulding died after suffering an asthma attack at his home near Kergunyah, a small town in northeast Victoria. His blind mother Rose Boulding was unable to call an ambulance because her home phone was not working. It had been out of order almost continuously for 13 days, despite the family contacting Telstra, the government-controlled telecommunications company, about 30 times to register complaints. Rose Boulding's partner, Barry Nugent, raced to a neighbouring property to phone for help but the boy died in his mother's arms before the ambulance arrived.

Despite Telstra's failure to provide a reliable phone service to the Bouldings, the ACA report exonerates the company and lets the government off the hook. According to the ACA, while there were deficiencies in Telstra's "fault management processes and administration for 'priority status' customers" the company "was not in breach of any of its regulatory obligations, nor had it failed to meet performance standards" set by the government's Customer Services Guarantee (CSG).

A closer examination of the report, however, reveals a system so starved of experienced staff and resources that it is incapable of handling even a limited emergency situation.

The reference to deficiencies in "priority status" customers is a case in point. Under Telstra's rules, priority status covers individuals "whose life, health, safety, or shelter would otherwise be at risk without a fully operational telecommunications service". For these customers, Telstra is obliged to give "priority to the restoration of faults" and "provide essential priority status 24 hours a day, seven days a week". But the regulations do not specify any time limits for fixing priority faults.

Rose Boulding is not only blind. At the time of her son's death, she had two asthmatic children, one of whom had lung problems, and she was caring for a daughter with a broken leg. In the 12 months before his death, Sam Boulding had received

ambulance attention on four occasions. The family lives 14 kilometres from the nearest public telephone and Ms Boulding's partner works away from home on rotating shifts. Telstra was aware of the family's situation, but did not inform Ms Boulding of her right to priority status.

In fact, the report shows that most of Telstra's private users do not know about priority status or how to register for it. Last month, 40,750 customers had priority status. Of these, only 18 were residential clients. The remainder were community, essential and emergency services.

This suggests a deliberate, if unofficial, policy to keep residential clients ignorant of the priority service in order to avoid extra strain on already overloaded technical services. Had the present limited priority service been made available to Rose Boulding, it would have increased the chance of her phone being operative and her son's life being saved.

In an attempt to ensure a phone service for medical emergencies, Ms Boulding requested a second line as a back up. Telstra installed a digital pair gain system, a cheap method of using a single line to provide an extra connection, normally for Internet use. Ms Boulding was not told that both phones would fail if the line went down.

The digital pair gain system, already used by 100,000 households, is reportedly saving Telstra billions of dollars. Shadow Information Technology Minister Kate Lundy said she received 500 e-mail complaints about the system in the 10 months to March 15.

The ACA's assertion that Telstra did not breach its regulatory obligations or performance standards may be technically correct, but entirely cynical when one examines the CSG standards. They require faults in "minor rural areas"—locations with 200 to 2,500 people—to be attended to within two full working days after notification. But because weekends and public holidays are not counted as working days, and complaints registered after 5 pm are not logged until the following day, lengthier delays are permitted.

Telstra's records show that in the 13 days before Sam Boulding died, his family logged three separate faults. Telstra claims that these were attended to within a total of five working days, so that the company fulfilled its CSG obligation. In fact, the family was without a service for 12 days out of 13. Both

Telstra and the report admitted there was not a single 24-hour period when the service was fault-free.

The first fault was lodged at 5 pm on Saturday, January 26 and was only rectified at 4.31 pm on Tuesday, January 29. Telstra records the fault as cleared in one day. The second fault, logged at 8.31 am on Wednesday, January 30 and cleared at 5.30 pm on Tuesday, February 5 (a full seven days), was recorded as being repaired within four working days. The third fault was reported at 2.57 pm on February 6, the day Sam Boulding died. It was cleared 24 hours later, but too late to save his life.

For the second fault, Telstra was not even obliged to meet the two-day limit because it issued a Mass Service Disruption (MSD) covering the period from February 1 to February 15 for all country New South Wales and parts of northeast Victoria, including Kergunyah. The MSD exempted the company from its CSG obligations “due to continuous rainfall in New South Wales that has prevented Telstra from accessing its telecommunications plant and equipment from February 1”.

The ACA report reveals that there was no damage from rainfall to Telstra facilities in the Kergunyah district, yet concluded that the MSD covered the second fault at the Boulding home because 20 percent of Telstra repair staff in the area were absent through sickness. This alone testifies to the fact that staff numbers are so lean that sicknesses cause crises. It is noteworthy that Telstra calculates that 1,200,000 customers were affected by the February 1 MSD, of whom at least 3,408 would otherwise have been eligible for CSG compensation.

The report refers to a lack of continuity in Telstra’s information systems, resulting in complaints being logged into one computer system but not another. This problem, however, results from a deliberate policy by Telstra to shed staff, shut down local depots and cut costs. Whereas rural and regional customers used to ring local depots directly, their complaints are now pushed through various call centres, sometimes in another state, and are handled by an array of operators. This system makes continuity impossible.

Most of the report’s recommendations are deliberately vague. Priority status faults should be repaired within 24 hours, or 48 hours in remote areas. Telstra should adopt “criteria and processes to make sure all customers with a genuine life-threatening health problems have access to priority services”. It should “inform existing and new customers of their right of priority” and “provide a highly reliable phone service for priority customers”. The definitions of “fault” and “working day” should be reviewed.

No deadlines are set in most cases, except for the government “reviewing progress” in June and September. What criteria will determine who is entitled to priority service? Will they include the elderly who are susceptible to falls, invalids who may require immediate assistance, or people working in dangerous occupations on remote rural properties?

One thing is certain: the criteria will be stringent and

determined on the basis of maintaining Telstra’s profit margins. In Rose Boulding’s case, the ACA report considers that only if all the factors in her situation were considered would she have qualified for priority status. If her problems were considered “in isolation” she “may not warrant classification”.

There are no guarantees that the recommendations will be implemented and, even if they are, the ongoing program of official cost-cutting will require Telstra to find ways to circumvent any new obligations.

In the final analysis, the difficulties facing people requiring priority services simply reflect broader problems caused by Telstra’s downsizing by successive governments, both Liberal and Labor. This program has resulted in a wholesale decline in services, especially in rural and regional areas. The report does not even mention the overall deterioration, let alone attempt to deal with it.

Sam Boulding’s death has brought this chronic situation to public attention in the most graphic and tragic manner. Little wonder that the government and the company’s top management are doing everything possible to bury the issue.

Attempts have been made to silence the Boulding family. The ACA asked Rose Boulding to sign a “deed of confidentiality” restricting her from revealing the report’s contents before Alston officially released it. She refused saying, “I think the rural community has the right to know where the problem is.”

Attempts have also been made to placate the family. After the ACA report was released, Telstra’s CEO Ziggy Switkowski personally phoned Ms Boulding and offered his condolences. However, his subsequent media statement, while accepting responsibility for “weaknesses that have been identified with our operating systems,” quickly added that ACA “did not find any evidence of wrongdoing or reckless behaviour” by Telstra. Switkowski later released an internal report by PriceWaterhouseCoopers with almost identical findings.

In his media statement on the report, Alston said Sam Boulding’s death was a “wake up call” that should focus Telstra “to ensure that not only priority needs” were met, but that problems were dealt with “speedily”. The government was determined to see that “all Australians have adequate phone services”.

This is the height of cynicism from a man who has presided over the destruction of tens of thousands of Telstra jobs since taking office in 1996. The restructuring program being pursued by Alston and his co-thinkers in preparation for the corporation’s full privatisation is creating the conditions for many more tragedies.



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