

Hundreds of reports of alleged abuse in care have led to an inquiry into how these allegations are reported and investigated. **Thomas O'Byrne reports**

Abuse alarm

LEADER has spoken to three outer east families who have concerns about investigations into the alleged abuse of their loved ones.

In 2011, Heathmont resident Andrew Coe had concerns his sister Margie, 52, who had Down syndrome, had been sexually and financially abused. While police and the Department of Human Services found no evidence that abuse had taken place, Mr Coe said the police interview process had not properly accounted for his sister's reduced ability to communicate.

"It was handled badly," Mr Coe said.

Ms Coe was initially interviewed by police, but Mr Coe said his sister was unable to disclose much information in the setting of a police interview.

"The detective asked her questions, but she had no idea what they were talking about," he said.

Ms Coe passed away in September last year, but Mr Coe and his family are continuing to lobby Victoria Police for improvements to its investigation process in matters involving people with disabilities.

Department of Human Services spokesman Mike Griffin said Victoria Police thoroughly investigated the allegations of abuse

and the department co-operated fully.

But for others, the protection of their family members remains an everyday concern.

Joan Reid, of Ringwood, has an autistic daughter with challenging behaviour. Ms Reid said staff across numerous care homes had used a range of punishments to control her daughter's behaviour, including isolating and excluding her from the house, feeding her just bread and water, and calling her names.

"She lives her entire life in fear of being punished," Ms Reid said.

While Ms Reid said many disability workers did a fantastic job, she said a lack of accountability, training and resources meant abuse could go unchecked.

Her views are shared by Kerry Lecluse, a former Ringwood East resident who recently moved to be closer to her non-verbal daughter's care home.

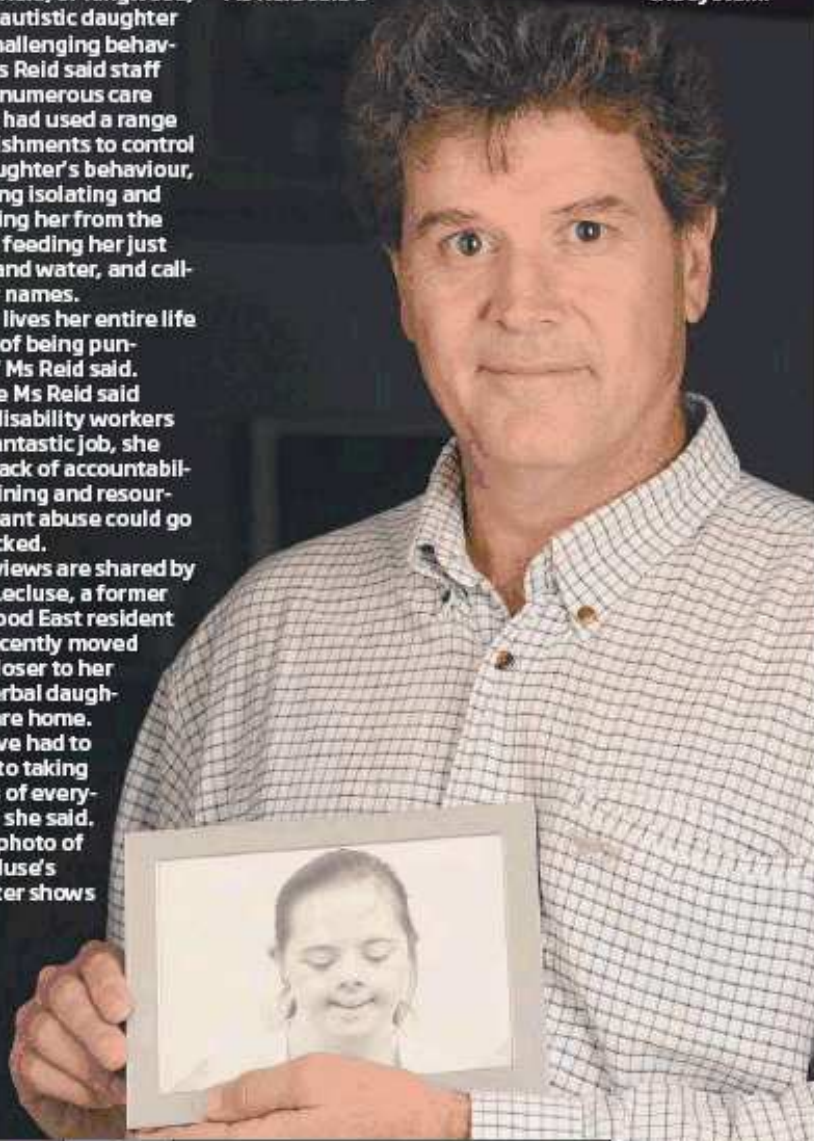
"We've had to resort to taking photos of everything," she said.

One photo of Ms Lecluse's daughter shows

deep bruising on her arm as a result of self-inflicted biting – something she said her daughter does if verbally abused.

Both Ms Lecluse and Ms Reid said a

Royal Commission examining the disability sector as well as investigations into allegations of abuse was needed to start a reshaping of the system.



Andrew Coe holding a photo of his sister Margie, who was sexually abused.

A system in disarray

AT A GLANCE

HUNDREDS of instances of alleged physical and sexual abuse of people with disabilities were reported last year, and authorities and local families say the system needs fixing.

Several families have told the *Leader* harrowing accounts of alleged abuse of their disabled family members, speaking with anger about authorities' investigation processes which they believe are lacking.

Their stories, and hundreds of others, last month prompted state Ombudsman Deborah Glass to announce an inquiry into how allegations of abuse in the disability sector have been reported and investigated.

The inability of many people with a disability to communicate evidence of abuse to police or disability workers, as well as incidents where allegations have not been adequately investigated or recorded, have been raised by various agencies.

Outgoing police Chief Commissioner Ken Lay said officers "don't always get it right" when it comes to dealing with reports of abuse.

"There are examples where we simply didn't investigate," he said last July.

"There are other times when we may have wanted to do the right thing but

- In 2013-14, the Disability Services Commission reported 309 category 1 incidents in Victoria
- Category 1 incidents are the most severe and may include death or serious injury, missing persons or sexual assault
- In the same period, community visitors from the Office of the Public Advocate reported 147 cases of abuse, neglect and assault in the disability sector

didn't have the skills, the resources or the knowledge to adequately respond."

Victoria Police will this year launch its first Disability Action Plan including the appointment of disability liaison officers.

Department of Human Services spokesman Mike Griffin said the department took allegations of abuse "very seriously", and incidents involving alleged abuse of residents by staff were reported to police.

Mr Griffin said the department could order an independent investigation if it had concerns.

"If a person has communication support needs, consideration would be given to providing communication support."

System 'fails' resident in care

THE Office of the Public Advocate has detailed the system's "failure" to provide a full forensic medical examination to a disabled resident living in Melbourne's east who went missing for five hours.

The OPA community visitors 2013/14 annual report noted that, in the eastern metropolitan region last year, an agency staff member driving a disabled resident back home from a day placement went missing, inexplicably, for five hours.

The staff member could not be contacted during some periods of the absence, despite having ac-

When the resident was eventually returned home, staff took the person to hospital for a precautionary forensic medical examination, but were told they needed a police referral.

However police said there could be no referral to the hospital without evidence of a crime.

"Community Visitors believe this resident was failed by the very systems designed to protect society's most vulnerable people" and the resident was "denied access to adequate health care and justice", the report states.

The agency staff mem-