

# The Australian Women's Register

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**Entry type:** Person

**Entry ID:** AWE5423

## Wilson, Bethia (Beth)

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**Occupation** Lawyer, Public servant, Tribunal Member

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### Summary

Dr Beth Wilson AM is a former senior public servant who retired in December 2012 after serving as Victoria's Health Services Commissioner for 15 years (1997-2012). In this role, Dr Wilson managed complaints made against health service providers.

After graduating from Monash University (BA 1975, LLB 1977), Dr Wilson worked in administrative law with a particular interest in medico-legal and ethical issues.

Prior to her role as Health Services Commissioner Dr Wilson was president of the Mental Health Review Board, a senior legal member of the Social Security Appeals Board and legal member of the WorkCare Appeals Board. She has also held various positions with the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, the Law Reform Commission, the Victoria Law Foundation and Telecom (now Telstra).

In 2001 Monash University acknowledged Dr Wilson by presenting her with a Distinguished Alumni Award. The award celebrated her contribution to research, public administration and ethical practice in the areas of law and health.

In 2003 Dr Wilson was recognised for her services to health with a Centenary Medal.

She received an Honorary Doctorate in 2004 from RMIT for her contributions to health education.

In 2008 Dr Wilson was named on the 2008 Victorian Women's Honour Roll.

On Australia Day 2013 she received a Member of the Order of Australia 'for significant service to the community of Victoria through the provision of dispute resolution in the area of health services'.

## Details

The fourth of five children of Isa May Wilson 'deserted wife', Beth Wilson grew up in Hastings, Victoria. She left school at age 15 because she had holes in her school shoes and no money to pay for new ones. Beth worked in shops, factories, fruit picking and fishing until she returned to night school at Prahran High School in 1970. Beth worked at Pict Frozen Pea factory in Notting Hill during the day. She was assisted by a Commonwealth Scholarship to Monash University and later, Gough Whitlam's abolition of university fees. At night school Beth met the feminist activist Mary Owen who became a dear friend and influence on her strong sense of social justice and women's rights.

At Monash Beth studied Arts and Law and later Librarianship at RMIT. She worked in the Library at Telecom and then as librarian/researcher to the Victoria Law Foundation and the Law reform Commission of Victoria. She is currently a mentor for Monash University students.

In the mid 1980s Feminist Lawyers was re-formed and Beth and her colleagues assisted two young women, Sandra and Tracey Collis who had been charged with perjury and jailed for withdrawing their claims of incest by their father. Convinced that these two young women were victims not offenders Feminist Lawyers worked with the Domestic Violence and Incest Resources Centre to launch a successful appeal to have the Collis sisters released from prison and later to have their convictions erased through a Pardon.

Feminist Lawyers sought the assistance of Barrister John Dixon (pro bono) and Fitzroy Legal Centre (Angela Palombo) to lodge a complaint to the then Solicitor's Disciplinary Board against the lawyer who represented the Collis sisters and their father. Not surprisingly the Board found there was a conflict of interest and upheld the complaint against Robert John Gallbally. John Dixon later assisted the Collis sisters in a civil suit against Robert Gallbally.

Beth worked in the legal and policy section of the Department of Health with Feminist Lawyers founder, Bebe Loff. It was an exciting time for policy as recent major reforms had been made with the establishment of the Health Services Commissioner, the Guardianship and Administration Board and the Mental Health Review Board. She also joined the editorial collective of the Legal Services Bulletin that later became the Alternative Law Journal and she established its long running column 'Sit Down Girlie'.

Beth was appointed to the Social Security Appeals Board in 1985, the WorkCare Appeals Board in 1990 and became President of the Mental Health Review Board in 1992. She is a past President of the Victorian Branch of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law.

In 1997 she became Victoria's Health Services Commissioner, a position she held until 2012. Highlights included an Inquiry into The Royal Melbourne Hospital, an investigation into the activities of a disgraced dentist turned cancer quack Noel Campbell and an Investigation into Peter DeAngelis aka Thunder Eagle a sham 'shaman'. Beth also assisted the very brave Ercan Tekin, a man with cerebral palsy who had been 'ripped off' by a chiropractor who claimed to be able to 'cure' cerebral palsy with hyperbaric treatment. Ercan's story was featured on The Law Report ABC Radio National, 16 June 2009 and in Beth's exit interview on The Law Report on 11 December 2012).

In 2006 Beth led an Australian Delegation for HREOC assessing the progress of China's human rights obligations in family planning held in Urumqi, Xiang Jing Autonomous Region, North West China. Beth travelled twice to Sri Lanka with AusMat to assist victims of the 2004 Tsunami and in 2014 she travelled to Canada to speak at an international conference on health complaints. Beth was a member of the Disability Services Board from 2007 to 2012 and she is a respected person of the Tarwirri Indigenous Law Students and Lawyers Association of Victoria.

Following her retirement from the HSC in 2012 Beth became Patron of the Continence Foundation of Australia, Patron of The Satellite Foundation, Member of the Board of Directors of Women and Mentoring, Independent Chair of the Royal Children's Hospital Travancore Child and Adolescent Health Service's Community Reference Group, Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) volunteer and Independent Chair of the VAC, Cabrini Hospital's Patient and Resident Advisory Council, Victoria Legal Aid Community Consultative Committee and is a member of Breacan's Community Advisory Group.

Australia has committed to the United Nations Declaration commitment to the Greater Involvement of People Living With HIV/AIDS (GIPA) and Beth is the Independent Chair of the VAC committee which is implementing GIPA. Beth is also a part time Legal Member of the Mental Health Tribunal.

Beth has her own business Lawfully Funny and is a popular public speaker and part time member of the Mental Health tribunal. She is also a member of Wild at Heart which brings the creative arts to the mental health community and performed in their play The Mental Health Act. In 2013 and 2014 she appeared in The Vagina Monologues.

Beth was a member of Joan Kirner's Women's Advisory Group in the 1980s and has continued to campaign for women's health reproductive rights. She also advocates on a range of social justice issues including euthanasia, women's rights, mental health, inequality and disability.

## Events

### **2008 - 2008**

Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

### **1997 - 2012**

Health Services Commissioner (Victoria)

## Published resources

### **Resource**

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

### **Site Exhibition**

Australian Women Lawyers as Active Citizens, Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project Team, 2016,  
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/lawyers>

## **Author Details**

Beth Wilson with Nikki Henningham

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## Digital resources



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