

## Follow the Yellow Brick Road. The Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs of Partnering Police, Child Protection and Sexual Assault Workers and Co-Locating Them in One Building

### A New Model For Service Delivery

Victoria has a new model for delivering services to victims of sexual assault and family violence. It is Multidisciplinary Centres (MDCs) which are partnerships of Victoria Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCITS), Counsellor/Advocates from Centres Against Sexual Assault, Forensic Physicians from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine and Child Protection Workers from the Department of Human Services. All of these agencies are located in one building in an MDC.

There are four Multidisciplinary Centres now in operation in Victoria. Two are based in Melbourne suburbs and two in major regional centres - one in the North of the State, and one in the West.

Two more MDCs will open in 2015, again in regional centres – in the East and North of the state.

As you can imagine, establishing these centres is not cheap, because it means finding premises that can accommodate 60 to 100 workers. So the question can be asked – why this model?

### History of MDC Development

After the initial fight in the 1970's by the Women's Movement to obtain services for victims of sexual assault, pressure had been brought to bear on the Victorian Police about their treatment of sexual assault victims and on the judicial system to curb the worst excesses of cross examination and prejudice. Even after changes to Police procedures and organisation and legislative reforms, Victoria still had the lowest rate of reporting of sexual assaults in Australia.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) had been asked to look at this issue in 2001 and in 2004 handed down 202 recommendations in a Sexual Offences: Law and Procedure Final Report. This report responded to the widely held perception in Victoria that the criminal justice system did not deal with complainants fairly. Amongst these recommendations a number related to legislative changes and Victoria Police procedures intended to address the following matters

- People who alleged they had been sexually assaulted were the least likely of all crime victims to report the offence to the Police
- Only 1 in 6 reports to Police of rape and less than 1 in 7 reports of incest or sexual penetration of a child resulted in prosecution
- Conviction rates for rape were substantially lower than for other offences and had fallen since the late 1980's

There were 10 recommendations in this report specifically related to Victoria Police which were around the need for enhanced training, ensuring victims were treated with sensitivity and providing continuity of contact for a victim. The report saw Police as gate-keepers to the criminal justice system and "vitaly important" in relation to an initial response to people who reported a sexual assault.

As well as the VLRC recommendations suggesting improvements could be made in the way victims of sexual assault were treated by the Police it had also become very clear that the majority of people assaulted were not reporting at all. CASAs in Victoria had consistently stated that most of their clients had never reported to the Police and even when encouraged to do so often came back discouraged by the response they had received from the General Duties member on the front desk at the Police Station. In addition to that an Australian National Safety Survey in 2006 conducted with many thousands of respondents found that only 1 in 10 women sexually assaulted in the previous 12 months had disclosed to anyone and certainly not to anyone in authority.

### MDCs

The Victorian Government response to the VLRC's recommendations was to develop a whole of government strategy and allocate, in the 2006-2007 State budget, \$34.2 million over 4 years aimed at reforming the way the criminal justice system responded to sexual assault. \$6 million was provided for the creation of a pilot project of two Multidisciplinary Centres one rural and one metro based. There was to be an evaluation conducted by Deakin University. The purpose of these Centres was to deliver integrated justice and human services responses by bringing together one of the newly created 27 Victoria Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Investigation Teams (SOCIT) with a sexual assault centre. Child Protection workers were added into the model later.

Sexual assault workers are social worker or psychologists and provide counselling and therapy. They also see their role

as advocating for justice for their clients. CASA workers have a strong awareness of their origins in the Women's Movement. The SOCITs are specialist teams of Police investigators with forensic expertise in the interviewing of sexual assault victims and offenders. Prior to these Teams being developed the Police role was divided between Sexual Offence and Child Abuse Units and Criminal Investigation Units. It had been highlighted in the VLRC report that this approach made for an inconsistent response.

It was hoped that this collaboration with the new Teams would

- Increase sexual assault and child abuse reporting rates
- Stem the attrition rates of reported matters through the criminal justice system
- Increase prosecution rates
- Reduce offending and re-offending
- Assist the recovery of victims

The two pilot MDCs were evaluated and victims interviewed confirmed their experience of the MDC was positive. This included the following six elements

- The victims stated they felt treated as a valued complainant  
"They never once made you feel it was your fault or anything."
- Their privacy and anonymity was respected  
"It is comforting knowing that unless somebody else has experienced this or either works here, they don't know what building you're going into."
- The number of service providers was minimised  
"I didn't have to explain my whole story or the whole case or where things were at because I was only dealing with one or two police members."
- They had a timely response  
"The police were here and then they got a doctor and they got a social worker so it was all waiting."
- Services were accessible  
"It's important because you don't have to go shopping for things, everything's in the one spot."
- The process was explained to them and they were kept informed of the legal status of their case.  
"They let me know all the time what was happening."

It is worth emphasising that MDCs are not located in Police Stations and that staff in the MDCs sit near each other not on different floors. This has a number of benefits for close working relationships. Obviously there are challenges in co-locating agencies with totally different cultures, but Police officers, counsellors and child protection workers share tea rooms, interview rooms and one reception team and this encourages liaison and collaboration.

### Benefits of Co-location

It was clear from the Deakin University evaluation that victims find the service they receive at an MDC preferable to separate facilities. There are also additional benefits which were not anticipated in the initial service model development but have become part of practice. These include

- Improving the process for interviewing children. If a child becomes distressed during a recorded Police interview a counsellor is asked to spend some time with the child and assist them with the process
- Increased access for children to counselling. Children who do not disclose when interviewed, but there are concerns about their behaviour which has led to the interview, are referred directly to SECASA for counselling with their non-offending parent/s or carers. Whilst this may have happened in the past when a child was interviewed in a Police Station the referral often got overlooked.
- The close relationship between the Police and the Child Protection workers leads to a quicker response time from point of notification to investigation
- Clients benefit from the proximity of agencies leading to greater and quicker communication

- Child Protection and CASA counsellors work closely with families where there are children and young people who require counselling.
- Counsellors ask SOCIT members to come into counselling sessions to explain what support can be given to someone uncertain about reporting
- SOCIT members call on counsellors when they have a victim with them who is ambivalent about reporting or counselling
- There are two daily crisis counselling appointments that SOCIT can book people into without consulting with counsellors
- Walk in clients for Police who need CASA input are seen as soon as a counsellor is free
- If the Police decide not to continue with an investigation the victim has a joint appointment with the counsellor involved and the Police member which makes for much clearer communication and allows for a challenge to the decision.

An example of how this process now works is a young woman who had been raped two weeks before came to counselling to deal with not sleeping and being hyper vigilant. She mentioned that at the time she was raped she had attended the local Police Station and spoke to the General Duties member on the desk who the victim felt was not helpful. She had walked out, decided not to report, and returned home. A friend had become concerned about her wellbeing and had persuaded her to attend SECASA. After talking with the counsellor the young woman had agreed to meet a SOCIT member. This only entailed the counsellor walking down the corridor to see if a Police member was free. The young woman subsequently reported and after some investigation an offender was located. In some ways the outcome is less relevant here than the process. In the end there was not a successful court case. However, throughout the process the victim felt supported, knew what was happening and, although disappointed, understood the final outcome.

Before the MDC the counsellor would have suggested that the young woman might want to talk to local Police. An appointment would have been made for her at the local Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Unit, the squads which predated the current SOCIT Teams. Counsellors are usually too busy to accompany the client to the Police Station. We know that people find it daunting to go to a Police Station and often do not follow through and talk to the Police. We had, over a number of years, many discussions about better ways to handle this issue. The tension for counsellors had been between ongoing service provision, waiting times for appointments and the need to help current clients with contact with the Police.

Our experience of the MDC is that the contact with Police is now easy. Even if a victim does not end up with the offender charged or a good outcome at court that they feel that they have been heard and treated with respect. For many people we see, this helps them recover and move on in their life.

### Initial Challenges With the Establishment of MDCs

- Selling the concept to senior Police.
- Initial difficulties with Police and Counsellors fully appreciating each other's roles. This included a perception of unfriendliness when doors between work areas were closed.
- Different assessments of risk.
- Providing enough counsellors that they have sufficient numbers to cope with large numbers of Police when large squads were moved into the MDC.
- Avoiding segregation and just co-locating. This has required an ongoing commitment to regular meetings, joint training and social events

### Conclusion

Developing collaborative work practice took the pilot MDCs a couple of years. The new MDCs have been able to benefit from this experience. This has led to changes in the layout of MDCs, an acknowledgement that there needs to be regular training and team building with all the partners and a modification of attitudes and practices for all involved.

The challenge for CASAs will be the maintenance of our feminist political agenda in relation to sexual assault and family violence whilst being involved with what are two organisations which are seen as coercive by much of the public and at another level are part of the criminal justice system. To date this has not proved a problem.

Carolyn Worth

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