



**Royal Commission**  
into Family Violence

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF HORACE WANSBROUGH**

I, Horace Wansbrough of 187 Langridge Street, Abbotsford in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

**Current role**

2. I am a manager at the Youth Support and Advocacy Service (**YSAS**). I have been with YSAS in various roles since May 2005. I currently manage a team of eight youth and family workers within the Youth Support Service (**YSS**), an early intervention program that aims to divert young people aged 10 to 17 from the justice system following contact with Victoria Police.
3. YSAS is a youth health not-for-profit agency that enables highly vulnerable and high-risk young people with substance dependence and misuse issues, mental illness and social disconnection to take control of their health and wellbeing.
4. YSAS offers a wide range of drug and alcohol services to young people spanning outreach, residential withdrawal and rehabilitation, supported housing and social enterprises. Within these programs we have specialist services for families that include Support for Young Parents and a Reconnect Family Support program.
5. YSAS works in consortium partnerships to provide health services to young people in secure youth justice settings with the Youth Health and Rehabilitation Service (**YHaRS**) and as lead agency for headspace Frankston and headspace Collingwood, under the auspice of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation.
6. In all, YSAS provides a range of integrated services across 12 sites in metropolitan and regional Victoria. I am based at the Abbotsford site.

7. I have a particular interest in the social determinants of problematic substance use, integrating youth and family work and early intervention at the younger age range of youth work practice.
8. On a day to day basis, my role involves managing a team of eight youth and family workers, liaising with external agencies, providing supervision and case review oversight, ensuring our service maintains a strengths-based and family inclusive focus where the young person's needs are at the centre of our therapeutic intervention.
9. I hold a small case load at YSAS, conducting home visits and outreach to families with complex needs, and at the Bouverie Centre, where I see families through their live supervision student program.

### **Background and qualifications**

10. I am currently undertaking a Masters in Clinical Family Therapy at La Trobe University, through the Bouverie Centre. I am due to complete this in October 2015.
11. In 2011, I completed a Graduate Diploma in Drug and Alcohol Studies at Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre.
12. Prior to joining YSAS, I worked in the following roles:
  - (a) Youth and family case manager/project manager at Inner City Reconnect in 2004;
  - (b) Street outreach worker at South Sydney Youth Services in 2004;
  - (c) Youth development worker at Springwood Youth Project between 1999 and 2004; and
  - (d) Phone counsellor at Northern Rivers Mensline between 1996 and 1998.

### **Submission**

13. YSAS has not filed a submission with the Royal Commission into Family Violence (**Royal Commission**), however I adopt the contents of the submission by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (**YACVic**), to which YSAS contributed.
14. Attached to this statement and marked '**HW 1**' is a copy of YACVic's submission entitled '*Young people and family violence - A submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence*' dated June 2015.



15. In addition to the issues raised in YACVic's submission, I would like to share with the Commission some of my own personal observations as a youth worker.

#### **The role of youth workers generally**

16. It is both my personal experience and I believe that of YSAS staff generally that, for young people presenting to our service, family violence is a very significant issue for them. A large proportion of young people we work with have a past history of having experienced family violence as a child. Those issues may well still be a feature of their current home environment, or if they are not residing at home, may have been a contributing reason to why they have left home.
17. In February 2014, YSAS conducted an internal analysis of all Victoria Police referrals to our YSS diversion program, which works with young people between the ages of 10 and 17 to avoid further offending following a police contact. From a sample of 301 clients, YSAS found that 55% of young people who had had recent contact with Victoria Police reported the frequency of family conflict in their home as 'often' or 'very often'.
18. I would say that at least two thirds of young people we see at YSAS use or have experience of psychologically controlling, sexually or physically aggressive violence in intimate relationships. The concerning thing about this is that, for the vulnerable young people we work with, violence in an intimate relationship is sometimes 'normalised'. It is hard for many adolescent young people to form healthy relationships, or recognise what a healthy relationship could look like, when they have been exposed to violence in a family setting as a child, exposed to poor models of relationships, and exposed to fixed gender scripts which normalise aggressive behaviours and normalise exploitative relationship dynamics. Typically, but not always, these gender and power differentials become more prominent in middle and later adolescence. We see in our service young women (as young as 15 or 16) already in long term relationships, where their freedom of movement, peer interactions and even service access are tightly controlled by a male partner.
19. At the time that we are working with them, young people are usually reasonably open to changing their behaviours and are actively seeking help, something they may not do as readily when they are adult. Youth workers have expertise in engaging with young people who are unsure of, or even hostile towards the service system. Many young people initially find accessing clinical services confronting, or

have received a number services as a younger person, such as counselling or psychological assessment at school, a family service intervention, or an intervention from Child Protection, but their experiences of those services can be quite negative. This is usually when the intervention has focused on the child or young person's 'problem behaviour', and failed to:

- (a) pick up on or address the wider contextual issues such as the family violence they are experiencing at home, which is the real cause of that problem behaviour; or
  - (b) put the child's wishes at the centre of the service plan or intervention.
20. Youth workers generally put the quality of their relationship with a young person at the centre of their intervention; using flexible, strength based, client centred engagement. We are often in a position to identify issues early and can use our supportive relationship to assist young people access specialist services that suit their unique needs.
21. For these reasons, I believe that youth workers have a really important role to play when it comes to prevention and early intervention of family violence, and in providing appropriate responses to young people who have experienced or are experiencing family violence or violence within an intimate relationship.

#### **Youth assessment tools and training**

22. Although a high proportion of young people who we work with have experienced or are experiencing family violence, and may well also be using violence in their intimate partner or family relationships, youth assessment tools do not routinely include specific reference to family violence, rather we tend to have assessment materials that are more globally about family relationships.
23. I think that youth workers would benefit from more training and resources to incorporate family violence in assessment tools, in order to properly identify past and current family violence issues, and to respond to those issues specifically

#### **Decrease in referrals from Victoria Police**

24. I have observed a recent drop off in referrals from Victoria Police to YSAS, where young people have been using violence in the home. YSAS used to get a lot of referrals through a Victoria Police referral system (Supportlink) regarding young



people using violence. The referrals to YSAS from Victoria Police would usually occur after a call out to a residence in an instance where a young person would be using violence at home. This might have included, for example, property damage or assaulting others in the household such as parents or other siblings. This call out could activate the referral to us. This system was really effective but these referrals dropped off since November 2014. The reason for this is unclear, but it seems unlikely that it is a result of a decrease in such incidents, and more to do with an unintended consequence of a change in referral protocols.

25. I am concerned that if young people exhibiting aggressive behaviours within the home are no longer being referred by Victoria Police to YSAS or another appropriate youth focussed service, they may not be getting the one-on-one case work support that they need. We have a trained team at YSAS to respond therapeutically to this problematic behaviour. It is important that young people get that opportunity while they are still young, and while they are more open to accepting help and to changing their behaviour.

#### **Drugs and alcohol**

26. The core focus of our work at YSAS is drug and alcohol related. In addition to the specialist programs I have previously mentioned, YSAS provides a range of community based and State-wide residential services to young people in metropolitan and regional Victoria. YSAS Community Programs (based on a youth outreach model) are located across six sites spanning Melbourne and regional Victoria. This gives YSAS alcohol and other drug workers the mobility to meet young people on their own terms in the communities where they live, and brings drug treatment into homes, schools and streets, wherever young people feel most comfortable. Our Day Programs at Dandenong and Abbotsford provide drop in access to Primary Health workers, structured activities, and monitored recovery space.
27. YSAS can provide access to Home Based Withdrawal, for people undergoing withdrawal while remaining in the community, or Residential Withdrawal. YSAS has 17 Residential Withdrawal beds across Fitzroy, Glen Iris and Geelong, all with a State-wide catchment, providing a supportive, home-like environment, for stays up to 14 days. In addition, YSAS has Residential Rehabilitation Programs for young people aged 16 to 20 years, which provides longer term care in a therapeutic environment.

28. YSAS conducted a State-wide Youth Needs Census (**SYNC**) in 2013 of 1,000 young people aged between 8 and 27 years who were commencing or continuing drug and alcohol treatment at the time of the census. Of these, 34 per cent were young women, 66 per cent used drugs on a daily basis, 67 per cent had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse or been a victim of crime, or involved in the Child Protection system, and 61 per cent had either current or past experiences of family conflict. Attached to this statement and marked '**HW 2**' is a copy of a related summary document titled '*Snapshot March 2014: Young People in Victorian Youth Alcohol and other Drug Services Summary data and key findings*'.
29. Whilst cannabis and alcohol remain the drugs of choice for regular use by most young people in treatment at 64 per cent and 63 per cent respectively, methamphetamines were used in the past 4 weeks by 35 per cent of the sample. Consistent with SYNC data from the previous year, young women who are treatment seeking emerged as having a range of unique needs, and an overall higher level of psychosocial complexity. 80 per cent of young women (compared to 60 per cent of young men) had experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse or been a victim of crime, or involved in the Child Protection system, 70 per cent of young women (as compared to 57 per cent of young men) had nominated family conflict as an area of concern.
30. More anecdotally, we have seen in the early intervention YSS program, a trend towards a younger age exposure to methamphetamines, especially in regional and outer metro growth suburbs. Local government drop in services and schools are increasingly having to manage presentations of methamphetamine intoxication or withdrawal.
31. It is essential that all young people in drug treatment, forensic and justice diversion programs are targeted with evidence based, trauma informed interventions, and young women in particular are engaged early before their level of substance use and severity of psychosocial complexity becomes so extreme.
32. One issue of particular concern for YSAS is the violent and abusive relationships that many girls and young women find themselves in with an older, usually young adult male drug dealer. These girls are obtaining their drugs from a man who they think loves and cares for them when, in fact, the man is effectively their dealer and is extremely controlling, violent and abusive, and is sexually exploiting them. These girls are extremely vulnerable for the reasons I have previously highlighted.



33. This issue is not a new one, but what is new and extremely concerning is that with the internet and social media, predatory, exploitative and dangerous older males have new avenues to access these extremely vulnerable girls and young women.
34. Social media has also made access to drugs easier in this respect. We see a lot of instances where young people seek substances through social media applications. It is not uncommon for us to see young women offering sexual favours in exchange for drugs and alcohol from an older male.
35. Social media is, in some ways, an invisible tool for young people to get access to drugs and alcohol, and messages about safely negotiating these spaces have been focussed on peer bullying or 'stranger danger' and less on connecting with young people who are utilising these media to make risky drug transactions.

#### **Dating violence in the age of social media**

36. Social media is also playing a significant role in dating violence among young people. However, there is poor knowledge among young people of what family violence is, and a lack of services to respond to violence in young people's dating relationships.
37. A lot of young men and women we see do not know what the scope of family violence is, even when they have been exposed to it historically. They think it is just physical violence. In fact, some young women we see at YSAS come to expect that they will be stalked by their partner or ex-partner on social media applications, such as Facebook. We also see young men behaving in ways where they are trying to control young women through limiting their access to online peer group relationships, or exhibiting online stalking behaviours.
38. These sorts of things illustrate that there is a significant role for youth workers in promoting online safety and healthy relationships. Young people need opportunities to be informed about the scope of family violence and more opportunities for professionals, teachers, parents and carers to work with these young men and women to explore with them what a healthy relationship could mean.
39. However, the system is currently lacking in referral services that deal with couples counselling for young people, and programs in schools, as outlined by the YACVic submission to the Royal Commission.

**Availability of appropriate services for youth and adolescents generally**

40. Overall in my experience, the youth sector struggles to find appropriate referral destinations for young people who have particular service barriers, and are presenting with the psychosocial complexity I have just described. For example, as of December 2014, Youth Connections, a program supporting disengaged young people to access school, training or job opportunities was lost due to federal funding cuts.
41. Services that offer outreach (including home or school visits), ongoing case management, are therapeutically driven and trauma informed are scarce or non-existent in some areas. A noticeable gap in the system is that the older the child gets, the less likely they are to get a response from Child Protection statutory authorities.
42. Likewise, the youth service system needs to be more attuned to developmental trauma histories, better assess for current safety within 'dating' relationships, be more family inclusive, and intervene earlier - particularly with high risk young women.

**Horace Wansbrough**

Dated: 14 July 2015