

SUBMISSION TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION

Through the eyes of a private practitioner, a different perspective addressing the domestic violence issues of families, particularly “the men” in the situation.

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This Submission will address the following criteria from the terms of reference from the Royal Commission into Domestic Violence:

1. Examine and evaluate strategies, frameworks, policies, programs and services across government and local government media, business and community organisations and establish best practice for the prevention of family violence, early intervention to identify and protect those at risk of family violence and prevent the escalation of violence, support for victims of family violence and measures to address the impacts on victims, particularly on women and children and perpetrator accountability.
2. Investigate the means of having systemic responses to family violence, particularly the legal system and by police, corrections, child protection, legal and family violence support services, including reducing re-offending and changing violent and controlling behaviours.
3. Investigate how government agencies and community organisations can better integrate and coordinate their efforts.
4. Provide recommendations on how best to evaluate and measure the success of strategies, frameworks, policies, programs and services put in place to stop family violence.
5. The need to identify and focus on practical short, medium and long term systemic improvements to Victoria's current response to family violence and the need for this response to be sustainable into the future.
6. The need for coordination across jurisdictions to provide the most effective response to family violence.
7. The systems and mechanisms to identify and appropriately prevent and respond to family violence including information sharing and data systems.
8. The expertise of professionals and academics working in the field of family violence, including any relevant international and Australian family violence research, past inquiries, reports and evaluations that may inform your inquiry and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Introduction

As a private practice practitioner working in the counselling field with men, women, adolescents and children it is of paramount importance that this Royal Commission has all the information needed to make legislative changes that bring our society forward in a manner that supports families in a meaningful way.

Background of practitioner

Having trained as a Social Worker with Adult Education qualifications my experience in the field has been in Rural Counselling/Training in South West Victoria for the past thirty three years. My experience includes work in the following areas:

- Residential Care for children and adolescents
- Foster Care
- Co-ordinating and training in TAFE programs
- Counselling with Veterans Affairs
- Counselling in University in Regional Victoria
- Perinatal infant mental health with women, children and men
- Private Practice in GP Practice
- EAP counselling with a number of organisations in the South West and the Commercial Building Industry.

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This spread of experience has enabled a cross section analysis of how our sector delivers services to the community and how the issues of family violence are much more complex than expressed in the media. **In my experience the violence is about the relationship much more than about gender issues.**

Focus of the submission

In this submission the material provided will shine the light on this issue with a sociological analysis of domestic violence from a family, mental health, personal isolation perspective. It will also demonstrate the complexities in families accessing basic services. The intention of this submission is to demonstrate how local initiatives and service collaboration can make a difference to this alarming issue. The material contained in this submission also captures the experiences in rural communities where lack of specialist services are characteristic of the area and those that are available have professional staff who are over worked, young and lacking the professional experience and organisational support to meet the demands of the job, particularly in relation to the complexity of domestic violence. My personal response to these demands has been to upgrade my skill base. This has been demanding in several ways:

1. Adding pressure to an increasing demand for service by taking time to attend professional development activities. This year I am attending training in advanced trauma. The commitment is eighty contact hours and involves four trips to Melbourne over five months;
2. The cost of this training is \$6,000 plus travel and accommodation costs;
3. The second step in training involves one hundred and eighty hours and is a further \$13,000 per annum;
4. The training has provided the necessary core skills for assisting in the assessment and implementation of practice knowledge in addressing issues such as domestic violence. It is my belief that several key issues are necessary for a skilful response; To identify the type of domestic violence occurring, whether it be situational or characterological violence.

"Couple therapy is contra-indicated when there is ongoing characterological domestic violence. There are two types of domestic violence, situational and characterological. In characterological violence the violence is extreme and there is a clear perpetrator and a clear victim. Violence is used to control and intimidate the victim. Situational violence is an argument that has got out of control and there is a milder violence that is symmetrical and does not cause injury or evoke fear or intimidation." (Gottman, Building the Couple Chasm, USA 2012)

In counselling couples, situational violence can be broken down into practical and manageable components and the couple can be supported without the threat of violence at home. However, in characterological violence there is a need to protect the individuals from the risk of harm and personal attack.

Clearly, practitioners need to be able to make these assessments. There is not enough understanding of the detail in treating and counselling individuals and families in these situations.

5. The cost of training and the depth of experience needed to meet these demands is prohibitive for many government and non- government agencies.
6. The organisational support structures for practitioners is variable and inconsistent in my experience, so how will this be redressed for many young practitioners?
7. To reduce the impact of this service deficit a collaborative approach to service delivery is required. The current government funding model does not support collaboration because it is based on a competitive model, lacks knowledge of local services and responds primarily to a political agenda. The pressure of certain lobby groups can overshadow the real needs.

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8. How are the real needs assessed? This assessment requires a new approach which involves an analysis of the capacity of government and private services taking into account the local politics and service relationships. Certain agencies work more collaboratively than others and it is unrealistic to expect all agencies to all work together. With local knowledge in place, agencies can deliver certain specialist services as a collective.

9. How does a service model counteract individuals and certain agencies from promoting self interest in their delivery? This is much harder to address. A regular update on the findings and outcomes of an inquiry of this nature will assist in maintaining standards in service delivery. I expect that regular audits of health, counselling, legal, training and community agencies should become a regular practice in maintaining the required professional standards.

The assumptions

There are a number of assumptions that need to be questioned about the terms of reference of this Royal Commission. Firstly, the issue of violence against women and children is not disputable. However, there is another reality that coexists. As the case studies at the conclusion of this submission illustrate violence against men is also evident. The question of causes in domestic violence needs to take a broader focus:

1. **Changing social roles – an increasing number of men are involved in domestic care of their children.** In a number of instances men are the “nurturers” of the children with the women fulfilling work outside the home. As observed in my counselling with men; in separation, parenting arrangements and property settlements, there appears to still be an inherit bias towards the women as the carers and nurturers of the children. Referring to attachment work such as Circle of Security, (Cooper, Hoffman and Powell, USA 2009) although the biological attachments are aligned with the birthing parent, equally important is the person who meets the nurturing needs of the children. **In our changing world, men are stepping up to be the nurturers of their children, so in separation I believe this reality needs to carry equal weight in the decision of custody verses access of the children.**
 2. The perpetrator is most likely to be the “male”. Although the domestic violence statistics tell a particular story, **equally relevant is the need to examine the relationship pressures and inter-relationships between men and women.**
 3. Quoting the (“Dialectical approach to Counselling families” June 2009) in treating domestic violence in families, it is important to examine the cycle of interaction between a couple in this situation. **The dialectical model examines both individuals contribution to the relationship breakdown and the PART counselling approach tracks the trauma triggers between couples. These skills are to be incorporated into my couples counselling as a empowering strategy for couples to adopt.**
 4. **I believe trauma underpins situational violence, which will not reduce until the trauma cycle is broken.** The skills to do this requires an understanding and an ability to deliver the knowledge in a practical way. The depth of skill required to achieve was discussed at the beginning of this submission.
 5. **Once this trauma is addressed, the domestic violence cycle changes and becomes more manageable. Workable outcomes emerge.** I have tested this in my private practice with positive outcomes. However, to achieve these outcomes some new thinking has been necessary and old counselling practices abolished.
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It requires personal confidence and commitment to step outside the “expected paradigms”.
6. **Another assumption to be challenged is the emphasis on the “gender issue”. I believe the impact of personality, mental health, health and well-being, changing workplace demands, poverty, geographical locations, social connectedness, extended family support, new understanding of spiritual and environmental impacts on our society are as equally relevant to the prevalence of domestic violence as gender is.** With the apparent push to “demonise” the behaviour of men as unacceptable and needing to be changed, this single focus polarises men and women in this debate. **Wouldn't it be more relevant to**

- identify how broader societal pressures impact on gender and to support both men and women to understand their individual needs in situations of domestic violence?**
- 7. Since working more extensively in men's health, my counselling style has altered from a “nurturing approach” to one that 'empowers’ the individuals.** There is more emphasis on “seeing the person – Marte Meo theory,” than supporting a recurring emotive account of life in an unhappy place. I now realise that as women we have an inherit approach to “protecting” our children. This can also translate as a perception of our children as people with “deficits that need to be fixed up by us”. **I question the socialisation of boys by their mothers. As women we are not exempt from the creation of domestic violence because generational and social learning/parenting practices are passed on by women and men.**
 - 8. Women need to embrace this issue with equal responsibility.** I have been challenging women to become more robust in their expectations of their partners and their couple relationship. This has proven to be effective in changing the communication and conflict strategies adopted by couples.
 - 9. Centralisation verses Regionalism; during the recent Federal Government changes services in Regional areas have been rationalised.** In particular the Medicare Local Services which have been working well are still in limbo regarding their future. Staff have been notified that the service discontinues on the 30th June 2015, yet no continuing plans are in place for the service. The programs offered by the Medicare Locals enabled people who would not be able to afford the cost of counselling to access specific support. This ensured that people falling between services could be picked up. These are essential services in the prevention of domestic violence; e.g. suicide prevention, perinatal support for families, general access for families who are victims of crime and Indigenous families seeking support. With the potential rationalisation and/or closure of these programs what impact will this have on the growing concerns about domestic violence?
 - 10. Federal and State Government services need to be more integrated and accountable to the community.** Local communities need to be involved in the decision making regarding the rationalisation of services.
 - 11. Underpinning values – as outlined in the introduction of this submission a shift to collaboration and partnership between couples needs to be supported.** There needs to be a paradigm shift to free both women and men from the current expectations of differential power imbalances. **This can be promoted by a shift in the value base of counsellors, legal practitioners and other community service providers to actively support co-operation between parties in conflict and/or relationship breakdown.** Although the rhetoric is to maintain a focus on children's needs in separation and divorce, my practice experience suggests that children are still caught in the conflict of the divorcing parents.
 - 12. The structure of the child support agency needs a thorough re-design.** Once court orders are in place, it is necessary to review the ongoing problems caused by the Child Support Agency. Please refer to the Case Studies at the end of this submission.

5.

Findings

Although it is acknowledged that in your terms of reference for the Royal Commission into domestic violence, that **the major risks are experienced by women and children, I have been working with a group of males in South Western Victoria who have also been physically and emotionally abused.** The support and acknowledgement of these men have been overlooked in policy development for a number of reasons:

- 1. The ratio of women to men in welfare and counselling is greater for women. Recently I attended a training and learned that of a group of twenty five participants, I was the only practitioner who was working in the field of Men's health.** I believe there is a disproportionate representation of women's issues compared to men.

2. **It is openly stated by colleagues in the counselling field that men under report on the intensity and degree of domestic violence instances occurring in the home.** I also believe men under report on the instances of violence against them in relationships. It is statistically recorded that men under report on their own health needs and concerns. Stuart Willder, Men's health practitioner in South West Victoria, has shown these facts in presentations to businesses in the local area.

3. **There is evidence of structural bias in service provision.** In working with a male of a family of four, the father was treated with disrespect and discrimination by Department of Human Service staff, who in the long term wrote a letter of apology to the family. My role was to advocate for him in receiving fair and just treatment as he sought help from basic services. [REDACTED]

4. **During counselling sessions with men specific issues raised are summarised below;**

- Problems with the child support agency is accessing information without being discriminated against;
- The need to implement an effective review of the family court decisions;
- Problems accessing their children and subsequent communication is tedious with ex-partners regarding father's access to their children;
- Father's face problems of either losing contact with their children to remain financially independent following property settlement and on going maintenance payments or keep in regular contact with their children rather than pursuing jobs with greater financial rewards. Sometimes such jobs are out of the local district, even in other states of Australia;
- If the ex-wife re-partners issues of access become more strained and complex;
- I have observed text messages sent to fathers that are provocative and unclear in relation to organising access of the children which can lead to aggressive responses from the fathers. In some cases this lead to "potential breeches of Intervention Orders". In supporting fathers the focus of counselling has been to assist them to maintain a clear focus about their children's needs and the ongoing conflict has been substantially reduced;
- Mental health issues are experienced by both men and women. In my current role, men report problems in handling the partner's challenging behaviour. Information from Beyondblue has been distributed extensively in this current role;
- I have observed a substantial number of men who are experiencing physical, psychological and emotional violence in their relationships. In some instances men report that their current /or ex-partners turn the children against them. They experience personal isolation in the family and at times use alcohol and drugs to cope with their problems;
- Psychological abuse has also occurred when women have claimed that they are afraid of their partners and put an Intervention Order on themselves and the children without substantial evidence.

6.

- It appears that once the request for an Intervention Order is made the Police are legislated to act in response to the woman's request;
- Men seeking help from some welfare agencies have difficulty in being seen as credible in some instances.

Impact of Counselling on Men

There has been many noticeable benefits of counselling. These are listed below;

1. Following a number of crisis related counselling requests, couples are seeking help earlier and the number of reconciliation's have increased;
2. Men are communicating more assertively and learning to change their perceptions of the need to treat their partners "like princesses" and then become disillusioned when the women do not live up to their expectations;
3. There is an increase of attention given to the needs of the children as the focus of the

- family;
4. In court hearings there is a shift in Magistrates decisions to appoint shared care of children between men and women more frequently;
 5. There have been an increasing number of couples deciding to make a mutual separation plan without a bitter battle over the children;
 6. Improvement in men's self esteem has occurred;
 7. Social skills have improved and a shift in thinking that men also deserve happiness has increased;
 8. In addressing core relationship issues, I have observed men choosing to reduce or discontinue the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism;
 9. [REDACTED]
 10. There has been a reduction in the numbers of reported breeches in Intervention Orders.

Recommendations

1. **That specialist services be increased not decreased in Rural and Regional areas**, such as couple's counselling, specialist trauma counsellors, family counselling and adolescent support services;
 2. **Specialist training be made more accessible to Rural Counsellors** by an increase in scholarships to attend training that is more expensive and more effective in assisting families experiencing domestic violence;
 3. Models of care reflect a more simplified structure, which suits men's needs more readily;
 4. Service funding is allocated with meaningful consultation with key agencies and private practitioners in local communities to promote collaboration not competition between services;
 5. **Reduce the rhetoric and emphasis on gender and focus more effectively on the individual parent responsibilities;**
 6. **Shift our values and expectations so that both men and women are supported when relationships breakdown;**
 7. **Celebrate the achievements of counselling interventions and community liaisons so there is a positive shift in the public perceptions of family reconciliation;**
 8. Create specific local peer group training sessions that support counsellors working in Rural and regional areas to continually upgrade skills and improve practice standards;
- 7.
9. Federal and State Governments to actively collaborate to promote service co-ordination and communication, breaking down system barriers currently experienced when accessing Centrelink, Local Government Systems, Child Support Agencies, Legal Services and Court Services;
 10. Actively promote the rebuilding of local communities, particularly in Rural and Regional areas.

The Next Step – Implementing a New Paradigm

The shift in thinking to achieve a new paradigm is to take the national concerns about domestic violence into a bigger arena. For example, the current training I am completing is run by a global group of professionals working in trauma. The group represents professionals from Australia, America, Ireland, Canada, Germany, Japan and England. These people have created a global support system for those doing the training. We can access the latest research on the brain and the methods to treat trauma more effectively.

At the training the presenters put up a list of situations that was considered to be a “trauma situation”. Domestic Violence was not on the list. We discussed this omission and I realised that the push on change in domestic violence in Australia is our response to the global push to reduce the threat of terrorism and global violence. Our presenter gave us a reference for learning about the motives and actions of women who wish to breed boys who will become suicide bombers in the future.

This illustrates the importance of looking at the bigger picture about gender.

The Theory

The theoretical basis of my current work is influenced by the work being done in Minnesota, USA. **The principals for establishing a new order is to assist men and women to become more attuned to the “dialectics of abusive relationships”. That is, for both parties to be aware that either party can be both the victim and the abuser.** The work of the counsellor is to track the processes used by the couple assisting them to understand these dynamics. My only qualification would be that this therapeutic intervention will work with “situational violence”. I am yet to discover how to treat people with characterological violence as an issue. Hopefully some other practitioner is designing solutions to this aspect of domestic violence.

Request for Resources

As a complete package my work involves the support of approximately five hundred men and their families in South West Victoria. The expansion of my learning will be directed to establishing a group of Regional practitioners to meet and discuss practice methods specific to our Regional area. I will encourage these professionals to complete the Sensorimotor training I am completing so that our impact across the communities in South West Victoria can be multiplied. The group will represent the following areas:

1. Primary School Social Worker
2. Catholic Education Psychologist covering secondary schools
3. Private Practitioner supporting Industry; e.g. Wannon Water, South West Institute of Tafe, Individual families
- 8.
4. Indigenous Co Operatives in Portland and Heywood
5. Private Practitioner supporting families, Workplace EAP counselling and the Commercial Building Industry

There is a need to expand services into the Portland area and our current work can be extended by adding the following to our current services;

1. An extension of the counselling services at South West Health Care, with specific responsibility to the Portland area;
2. An extension of the perinatal services at South West Health Care to extend to Portland area. The practitioners require specific skills in counselling, perinatal infant mental health and Circle Of Security;
3. The introduction of Workplace mentoring programs across the Building Industry for South West Victoria. The primary area in need is Portland.

Conclusion

It is an opportunity to put this information to you for consideration in the Royal Commission. [REDACTED]. It is an opportunity for them to be heard and

respected as worthy citizens of Australia. It has been an opportunity for myself as a practitioner to translate the stories I hear as an avenue to create positive change in our communities. I wish to thank my support person and editor for her enthusiasm and energy.

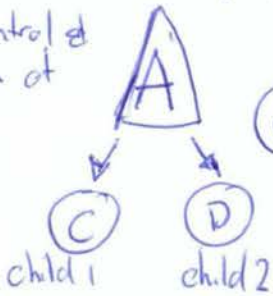
I request that you consider our information with respect and give the Rural and Regional people of Victoria the same opportunities as our Urban counterparts.



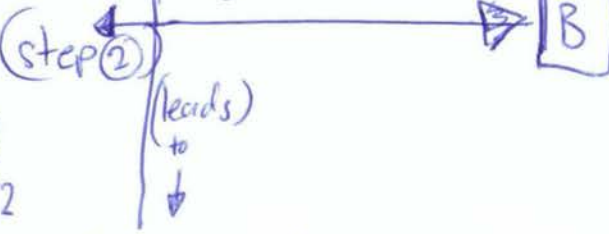
In my CASE!

2010 Parent A moves to [redacted] children move with Parent A. Parent B no choice!

Parent A gives full control & no regulation of children!



Parent B - Court agreement holds X/MAX/LESSERALTY every second weekend! (Doesn't threaten).



BREAK DOWN

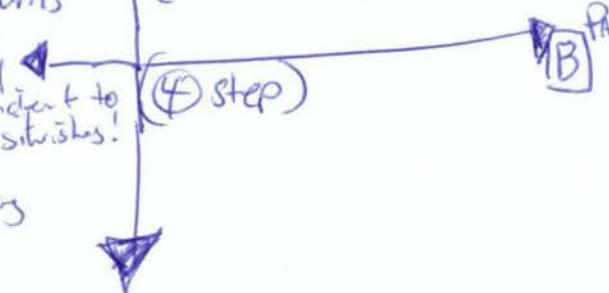
Parent A not adhering to Court Agreement. Children not seeing Parent B.



Parent B - feeling that orders not being followed that only avenue is BACK TO COURT! expense (suffering not seeing) children etc as agreed.

Parent A Admits not adhering to orders. no penalty! Problem continues - Also learns that no penalty so confident to do as wishes. children not seeing Parent B.

BACK TO COURT (no result).



Parent B - expensive Costs - no result - isolation/discriminate - no help/support given! - not seeing children! as agreed!!

Parent A - not having to fear about breaking court orders continues to ABUSE SITUATION and doesn't comply at all. In fact, now using this position to hold Parent B. Full Break Down.

Parent A - not having to fear about breaking court orders continues to ABUSE SITUATION and doesn't comply at all. In fact, now using this position to hold Parent B. In abusive situation.

Parent B Realises that this type of situation of ABUSE is futile. Still not seeing children. Struggling - mentally - financially. Being held to ransom!