

## **Indigenous Healing for Sexual Violence**

*Dorinda Cox – Sexual Assault Resource Centre, Perth WA*

This paper highlights the changes and reintroduction of Indigenous specific service delivery models as a result of the Gordon Inquiry recommendations from 2001.

### **Background**

The State Coroner's report in November 2001 on the death of a teenage Indigenous girl at the Swan Valley Nyungah Community is a chilling account of a young person's tragic life. In her short life this young girl encountered sexual violation, violence, and the ravages of alcohol and substance abuse.

In desperation, and despite contact with several Government agencies, she died in tragic circumstances at the age of 15. Coroner Hope commented that this story is by no means unique and that sexual abuse of children is endemic in Indigenous communities throughout Western Australia.

In the aftermath of the Coronial Inquest the Government moved quickly to establish a formal inquiry to provide advice on how best the Government should deal with widespread sexual abuse and violence within Western Australia's Indigenous community.

The report by the Inquiry, headed by Magistrate Sue Gordon, ran to over 640 pages and made 197 findings and recommendations.

Some of the findings were that sexual abuse is widespread in Indigenous communities.

Only 10-15% of sexual assaults are reported to police, but this is much lower in Indigenous communities (Gordon, Hallahan & Henry 2002).

It is estimated that over 88% of sexual assaults in Indigenous communities go unreported. (Robertson 1999)

The final report made specific recommendations to the Sexual Assault Resource Centre in Perth, which were as follows;

- Expansion of delivery of sexual assault services to the metropolitan and regional areas.
- Increase counselling services which are appropriate for Indigenous people
- That SARC is a key support agency for all sexual assault services statewide
- Development of mutual support and learning contracts with Indigenous agencies.
- Reinstate education and training services
- Reintroduce Aboriginal Officer Liaison positions

## **New changes to service delivery for Indigenous clients**

### *Education and Training services*

The reintroduction of the Education and Training services at SARC has seen the development of innovative training programs developed in consultation and collaboration with the WA Federation of Sexual Assault Services in regional areas of Western Australia.

Programs that extend over two and a half-days on medical, forensic and counselling issues have been conducted in the following regions:

- Northam
- Bunbury
- Albany
- Geraldton
- Warburton
- Broome
- Kalgoorlie

In addition to the above mentioned workshops, in Port Hedland – workshops presented were “It happens to boys, Introduction to Sexual Assault and the Police Sexual Assault Training course. Katanning and Bunbury were specific to medical and forensic training. Telehealth – training via videoconferencing was delivered to the Kimberley and Pilbara regions with a program of 5 sessions being offered to those locations.

The training programs have helped to develop excellent networks with generalist health and welfare agencies, indigenous agencies as well as the Police. These training programs provide opportunities for other organisations to learn and grow through the sharing of information, skills, and networks.

Generally over 90% of participants indicate that the training offered has improved their knowledge, competence and confidence moderately to extremely.

Rural and remote areas are isolated and have limited opportunities for training in general. SARC’s focus for the future will be to train Aboriginal Health workers and other professionals in those areas through the development of training package, possibly on CD rom or similar, in conjunction with Indigenous agencies in regional areas.

### *Aboriginal Liaison Officer*

With the reintroduction of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer position, which had previously been abolished in 1999, the following initiatives have been developed:

- All education and training events conducted in the metropolitan and rural/remote areas include a module on working with Indigenous clients who have experienced sexual violence.

- The rural and remote training has involved conducting education and training not only for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers in the field, but also the Indigenous communities (eg. Warburton, Katanning, Albany, Port Hedland and Broome).
- The ALO has a significant role in liaising with agencies that provide a service to a large Indigenous client population (eg. DOJ, Police, DCD, Women's Health Care Services) and supports them in developing a service that is culturally sensitive.
- The ALO supports Indigenous clients who present for medical/forensic and/or counselling service and request an Indigenous worker's involvement.
- Development of Indigenous specific brochures, dvds and pamphlets.

#### *Cultural Awareness package*

The Aboriginal Liaison Officer provides ongoing education and training and specialist consultation to medical and counselling staff at SARC to ensure SARC provides a culturally appropriate service. Cultural awareness training package has been provided to all counsellors and doctors at the Sexual Assault Resource Centre. This package includes language, kinship systems and the historical aspect of trauma for Indigenous people. Case studies and discussion groups facilitated the delivery of the package.

Commitment has been given by SARC management to have the training included in the orientation of new staff and for it to be maintained on an ongoing basis.

#### *Counselling at SARC office and outreaches*

The assessment process at SARC for Indigenous clients is on a priority basis. It was recognised that in order to engage and retain Indigenous clients in the counselling service, they needed to be made a priority and allocated to counselling outreaches as soon as practicable.

Transport via a taxi voucher or similar to assist indigenous clients to attend counselling sessions or the crisis sexual assault service, has been negotiated and implemented.

#### *Specific counselling services for Indigenous people*

A need was identified by the Aboriginal Liaison Officer and the Co-ordinator of the Counselling services for SARC, for specific Indigenous counselling services to be established in two pilot locations.

The first location selected was the Anawim Women's Refuge in Perth. The service is widely accessed by local Indigenous women and itinerant women from the Western Desert areas.

The counselling service is offered via the day centre for one morning per week, which is accessible to all women and provides a flexible and immediate arrangement for the client, without having to make appointments or having to go through an assessment process.

The second location selected was the Swan City Youth service in Midland. The youth service catered for youth people in the area to be able to drop in to the centre on a regular basis and be able to access visiting services.

Local Indigenous youth and also transient Indigenous youth visiting families in the area or homeless readily accessed the service.

A counsellor was made available to the service for one morning per week. She was able to engage with the youth in their environment and discuss issues about sexual violence in a non-confrontational way.

This participation with the Swan City Youth service also led to the involvement of SARC in a youth specific program. This program was based on the issue of consent for sexual behaviour. The Youth service ran TAFE sessions from their premises and was happy for the group of students to be involved in the project.

The group of students wrote scripts which included scenarios about drink spiking, date rape and; Internet dating. Most of the students acted in the video/ dvd titled "Ready, Willing and able". A brochure for young people is also available with this resource.

This resource is used as part of SARC's schools program that is delivered to approximately 2000 students per year.

#### *Development of resources*

One of the key initiatives that were undertaken by the Aboriginal Liaison Officer was the contracting and purchasing of Indigenous artwork for the reception area at SARC.

The reasoning behind this initiative was to give a sense of acceptance at the service for Indigenous people.

The artwork purchased comes in three separate paintings; all pieces being unique in colour and style and telling the story about the journey of healing from sexual abuse.

From the artwork purchased SARC was able to use the graphic design on a new indigenous specific brochure. This brochure has no mention of sexual assault or abuse on the front cover and used simplified language.

A poster with a similar design was developed, to advertise the services available to the Indigenous community.

The Training and Education unit developed two dvd/videos, one of those was "Working with Aboriginal adolescents and adults."

The dvd/video was made in a clinical setting and covers the issues or complexities that health professionals may encounter when dealing with an Indigenous adolescent or adult and sexual violence, ie kinship systems or shame in the community.

The second dvd/video, titled “Responding to sexual assault and abuse” has three different scenarios including a recent sexual assault of an adolescent and adult, and child sexual abuse with mental health and drug use issues.

### *Indigenous Reference Group*

A sexual violence Indigenous Reference Group has been established. The group envisages that its core function will be to research and recommend to appropriate government and non-government agencies, best practice models and methods for indigenous communities to work with Sexual violence and related matters.

The group’s membership includes government, non-government workers and community members, to engage people at all levels and uses their expertise and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

The key outcomes for SARC has a result of the implementation of culturally appropriate service delivery have been in the core business areas of our service. This includes medical/forensic in the emergency service for recent sexual assault and the counselling area for historical and follow up cases. The reintroduction of the Education and Training and Aboriginal Liaison positions and services.

The significant increase in these areas has been due to the increase in information and accessibility to SARC for the indigenous community.

The flexible and culturally sensitive service offered to indigenous clients has assisted the community in accepting a mainstream government agency to provide services for sexual violence to indigenous people.

It is anticipated that the Education and Training unit and Aboriginal Liaison Officer at SARC will continue to develop, implement and assess initiatives that increase access and awareness for members of the Indigenous communities who experience issues related to sexual violence. Also, to continue to provide evidence based cultural information to non-indigenous workers, services and communities so as to increase their awareness of the issues specific to Indigenous people.

### References

Department of Health (2004) *Western Australia’s Mental Health Strategy 2004-2007*.

Department of Health (2005) *WA Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Strategy 2005-2008*.

Department of Health (2005) *Strategic Intent 2005-2010*.

Robertson, B. (1999) *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence Report*, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Queensland.

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