



TRANSFORMING THE RESPONSE TO SEXUAL ASSAULT & FAMILY VIOLENCE

Two of Geelong's highly regarded specialist family violence services are in the process of merging to create a strong and robust platform to prevent and respond to the high levels of sexual assault and family violence in our community.

The partnership of Minerva Community Services and Barwon Centre Against Sexual Assault (Barwon CASA) builds on many years of specialist expertise and will enable the new service to transform the response to sexual assault and family violence in the Barwon and Wimmera regions.

Chief Executive Officer, Helen Bolton said, "It is timely to bring our two services together. Women and children experiencing family violence will receive a comprehensive service that can respond to their immediate safety needs; the new service is able to address the effects of the trauma they have experienced and support them towards recovery."

As noted by the Royal Commission into Family Violence, there is a high co-existence of family violence and sexual assault and the successful implementation of their recommendations 'will require new ways of thinking and collaboration'.

"In bringing our two organisations together, we are creating a single entry point and highly efficient model to meet

the needs of people in our community who are experiencing sexual assault and family violence," Ms Bolton said.

According to Renee Fiolet, Chair of the Minerva Board, "We think it's about revolutionising the way the service system works. Our intention to merge is a first step on the way to seeing real change to the way services are delivered; it will make it much easier for women and children to have a coordinated response."

Informed by best practice and evidence-based models, Barwon CASA and Minerva have been at the forefront of innovative responses in recent years. Minerva has led the way in working with Victoria Police in responding to women experiencing family violence and also provides access to accommodation. Minerva's services also include support to women attending court, and they deliver a project working with Culturally Linguistically Diverse Communities.

Barwon CASA has a strong history in providing therapeutic support to people who have experienced sexual assault

and family violence and is a partner in the Barwon Multidisciplinary Centre (Barwon MDC), one of only six such centres in Victoria. Multidisciplinary Centres have been shown to deliver better coordination of services, more timely responses and positive outcomes for children, young people and adults who have experienced sexual assault.

Dr Kate Fitz-Gibbon, Chairperson of the Barwon CASA Board said, "Bringing our two services together combines our expertise, specialist knowledge and skills and enables single area entry points that will help to streamline and eliminate any confusion currently experienced by victims of family and sexual violence and service providers who refer into our services."

Helen Bolton reflects that in the years since Barwon CASA joined the MDC in 2012, "We have seen the difference co-location and collaboration of specialist services makes for people who come forward to seek assistance in the face of such traumatic experiences; it is much easier for victims to find help and to get the right assistance."

ruby health

THE COMMUNITY HEALTH NURSES, TOGETHER WITH A RANGE OF PROFESSIONALS IN THE BARWON MULTIDISCIPLINARY CENTRE (MDC), PROVIDE A COMPREHENSIVE TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE. THE SERVICE IS FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL AND OPERATES 52 WEEKS A YEAR.

AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO PROVIDING THE RIGHT HEALTH CARE FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIMS

There is substantial evidence that the health status of victims of sexual assault is poorer than that of the general population. Ensuring that victims of sexual abuse get the appropriate health care at the right time is an important part of effective health service delivery and trauma recovery. Barwon CASA and Barwon Health have formed an innovative partnership, joining forces to employ two Community Health Nurses.

The Community Health Nurses coordinate a range of health care services to people who have experienced sexual assault through private and confidential discussions on their health needs. Nurses can assist with health advice and education on matters such as diabetes, healthy eating, contraceptive choices, sexual health, tobacco use, pregnancy, heart health, asthma and a range of other needs based on the client's own identified health issues.

They will also work with the client in developing individual health plans, identifying gaps in health screening and accessing local and other health and community services.

It is very difficult to measure the true extent of violence against women, as most incidences of sexual assault and family violence go unreported. But what we do know is that there is a huge health related impact for women and children who experience violence. There are often many barriers to accessing health services and the experience of family violence and sexual assault can make this more difficult.

The Barwon Multidisciplinary Centre (MDC) was developed to improve responses to sexual offences and child abuse. The centre co-locates the centre against sexual assault with child protection practitioners and specialist sexual offences police in a single location to provide a collaborative person-centred response. By including the community health nurses in this model the person is able to receive support and assistance, and, importantly, assessment of complexity and risk in order to identify the most appropriate pathway. The model emphasises people taking an

active role in their health and wellbeing and provides greater control about their choices and decisions.

The nurses have a critical role in establishing strong links with other health services in the area to ensure that people who have experienced sexual abuse and women and children experiencing family violence are provided with access to other relevant health services.

The role of the health nurse forms part of a continuum of care within the MDC that aims to respond to the person's physical, emotional health and wellbeing. The nurses will provide health care to people who may not otherwise access health services.

The Community Health Nurses, together with a range of professionals in the MDC, provide a comprehensive trauma informed practice. The service is free and confidential and operates 52 weeks a year.

"There is a growing need in the Barwon area to support the health needs of people who have experienced sexual assault. We welcome this collaboration with Barwon Health and feel that we are even better placed to offer our clients a comprehensive service that will further improve their path to recovery," Ms Bolton said.

CREATING A SINGLE ENTRY POINT

Barwon CASA and Minerva's intention to merge will further add to the MDC model and bring more specialist staff together to create a single entry point that provides support and a holistic service, all in one location.

The commission heard that the siloing of family violence and sexual assault services can lead to victims having to tell their stories multiple times, creates confusion for victims who often have need of services from both organisations, and also causes confusion for referral agencies. The formation of the new organisation is intended to break down these silos and work collaboratively to achieve the best outcome for clients.

Ms Bolton said, "We have strong and genuine partnerships with local services and look forward to building on the opportunities available to address sexual assault and family violence. We are driven by our commitment to ensure that all women and children in our community can live a life free from violence and abuse."



Back left to front right: Kaia De Burgh, Barwon Health Nurse; Helen Bolton, Barwon CASA CEO; Kerrie Smith, Barwon Health East Area Manager & Lauren Langley, Barwon Health Nurse

Photography by Mary Thompson Photography
www.marythompson.com.au

IF YOU OR SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU NEEDS HELP, PLEASE CALL:

VICTORIA POLICE **000**

BARWON CASA SEXUAL ASSAULT
CRISIS LINE **1800 806 292**
(24 Hours free call)

MINERVA COMMUNITY SERVICES
5224 2903

SAFE STEPS (24 hours) **1800 015 188**

1800 RESPECT **1800 737 732**

BARWON HOUSING &
HOMELESSNESS SUPPORT
1800 993 093

LIFELINE (24 hours) **13 11 14**

SUICIDELINE VICTORIA (24 hours)
1300 075 599

CHILD PROTECTION - **1800 075 599**
After Hours **13 12 78**

BARWON HEALTH
(Psychiatric After Hours)
1300 094 187