

# Guest Editorial

## The prevention of sexual abuse issues, challenges and resolutions

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the depth, extent and impact of sexual violence globally (National Sexual Harm Resource Center, 2016; UNICEF, 2014). In the last decade, in particular, we have seen a rise in the reporting of sexual abuse, current and historical, linked to institutions, clubs, charities, colleges, and the church, as well as an increased media profile of sexual violence.

The financial, social, and health implications of sexual abuse provide a strong argument to reframe our understanding of, approaches to, and responses to it (Laws, 2000; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; McCartan, Kemshall & Tabachnick, 2015); arguing that we should move from a criminal justice only approach to a health, and more broadly a public health, approach (McCartan, Merdian, Perkins & Kettleborough, 2018). In recent years the research and practitioner communities have started to advocate for a public health approach to stopping sexual abuse based upon the fact that sexual abuse is a life course and multi-disciplinary issue impacting not only individuals, but communities and society as a whole (see Laws, 2000; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; Brown & Saied-Tessier 2015 & for a broader discussion of a public health approach in responding to sexual abuse). A public health approach offers a unique insight into preventing and responding to sexual abuse by focusing on the safety and benefits for the largest group of people possible and providing a comprehensive response to the problem. A public health approach allows a reframing of sexual abuse that advocates proactivity and prevention in the place of reactivity. A public health approach focuses on four levels Primary (broad based population level interventions – media campaigns, etc), secondary (working with at risk populations – the Stop it Now inform program, STOPSO, Safer Living Foundation), tertiary (working to stop relapse – treatment programs like Kaizen and Horizon) and quaternary (working to reduce the negative outcomes, and collateral consequences, of tertiary interventions – Circles of Support and Accountability). Therefore, a public health approach emphasises the opportunities to intervene at the primary or secondary stage, before sexual abuse or violence has occurred, as well as at the tertiary and quaternary stages, after the abuse has occurred, to help victims and perpetrators (Laws, 2000; Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; Tabachnick, 2013; Kemshall & Moulden, 2016). In regard to sexual violence prevention, the core aim of these four levels is to stop offending, protect the public, reduce the impact of sexual violence and manage risk (McCartan et al.,

2015; Smallbone et al., 2008). These preventative stages work within a socio-ecological framework that targets the individual, the relationship, the community and the societal level (Krug et al, 2002; Brown, 2018; Shields & Feder, 2016) by drawing on multi-disciplinary knowledge and perspectives; which enables both macro (societal, community and institution based) and micro level (individual, family and relational) solutions. This means that we are able to think about the reality of poverty, social conditions, education, community management, individual risk and protective factors (including, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's), mental health issues) in respect to actually, as well as potential, victims and perpetrators. However, research in sexual abuse prevention, internationally, indicates that the majority of interventions happen at the tertiary level, with a smaller number at the primary level with a growing, but limited, body of interventions at the secondary level (Eradicating Child Sexual Abuse (ECSA), 2018; Troubled Desire, 2018). Initiatives such as Together for Childhood (NSPCC, 2018) which is taking a place-based approach to learn what works in the prevention of child sexual abuse spanning across the public health prevention continuum are important in helping to build the evidence base on effective approaches in a field that has relatively little empirical evidence of efficacy or impact.

This special edition resulted from discussions within the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abuse (NOTA) prevention committee. The NOTA Prevention Committee works to promote and share learning and best practice in the prevention of sexual abuse and violence and reports through to the NOTA board. The committee has links to other prevention focussed organisations in the UK and internationally. The aim of the special edition is to highlight ongoing research and practice into the prevention of sexual abuse, through the five articles contained herein. These articles cross the spectrum of issues and challenges related to the prevention of sexual abuse, across a broad spectrum of potential perpetrators, potential victims, potential modes of offending behaviour and institutions which results in a number of diverse approaches.

Two papers focus on youths that commit sexual harm the first by **Silovsky, Hunter and Taylor** addresses the impact of an early intervention that works with youths to address their problematic sexual behaviour. The program, which is delivered in the community, works to address the youth's problematic sexual behaviour through multi-family group sessions that involve the youth and a primary caregiver. The outcomes of the multi-site quasi-experimental study indicate positive outcomes **for** the youths and their wider family circle, with them better understanding the causes and consequences of their problematic sexual behaviour and how best to manage it. This piece of secondary prevention really highlights the importance of working pro-actively and in a supportive

manner with populations at risk of committing a sexual offences; also, it offers suggestions for how one might want to frame safeguarding policies and practices in the future. The second study by **Stewart, Sitney, Kaufman, DeStefano & Bui** compliments the Silovsky et al study as it focuses on the role of families and significant others in preventing problematic sexual behaviour in youths. The Stewart et al study focuses on the role of parental monitoring in the prevention of sexual abuse. The study indicates that the more proactive, engaged and structured the parental/caregiver relationship was, the more likely the youth was to stop engaging in problematic sexual behaviour. This study straddled the secondary, tertiary and quaternary prevention levels, as it worked with juveniles, juvenile delinquents and non-incarcerated juvenile controls. Both of these studies highlight that having a clearly structured support system that you are accountable to and that holds you to account can work to prevent problematic sexual behaviour in youths; however, it is more likely the case that this outcome is transferable to other populations, like adults who sexually offend as well.

One of the biggest issues facing society today is sexual abuse and sexual harassment and nowhere is this more clearly evident than in institutions, where secrecy and closed cultures can provide a fertile breeding ground for abuse. The Catholic Church scandal, recent scandals involving foreign aid charities and historical allegations have really brought this issue to light in recent years. One institutional grouping that has responded to the issues surrounding sexual abuse proactively, if not in the most coordinated way, has been the university sector. Both nationally (National Sexual Harm Resource Centre, 2015), and internationally (National Sexual Harm Resource Centre, 2015; Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017), sexual abuse as well as sexual harassment have been identified as major issues facing universities and student life, which has resulted in a number of primary (i.e., social norms campaigns) and secondary prevention (bystander intervention, student support and welfare) programs. The two papers in this special edition on campus-based sexual abuse deal with two key processes, disclosure/reporting and the university response. The paper by **Orchowski, Bogen, Leach & Lopez** explores the way in which American universities are informing their students on appropriate responses to sexual assault disclosure, which includes what to say, where to go and what outcomes are available to them within the institution. The paper highlights that there is no common practice, that there are inconsistencies across institutions and that the victim is not always framed as being at the heart of the process; although, this paper speaks to an American experience, the reality is that the UK experience is not much different. The second paper on campus-based sexual abuse deals with the fallout of sexual abuse and what institutions do in response and how they manage the issue. **McMahon, Karp & Mulhern** discuss the challenges of integrating people who have committed sexual abuse and their victims back into the university community after the event has occurred; which

presents considerable logistical, policy, practical and emotional, as well as psychological, challenges. McMahon et al discuss the potential use of restorative justice as a means to do this and in doing consider the challenges, benefits as well as impacts of it upon the victim, perpetrator and/or wider community. These two papers really highlight the challenges of sexual abuse in institutional settings and how we need guidance and practices on relating to the 4 levels of prevention and what the university's role is.

The main challenge of preventative work is acknowledging, capturing and responding to the user voice. Being able to build useful secondary and tertiary prevention programs means knowing what users want, need and will respond to. We are starting to see a rise in research and practice that is looking at the role and voice of the service user in understanding why people offend; we can therefore better understand how to respond and prevent sexual abuse. In their article **Lambie & Morgan** explore the reasons why men who download and view child sexual abuse imagery, with the aim to understand how to build better prevention and intervention services for these people. The study really highlights the reasons why people offend and how they maybe helped to stop from offending in the first place.

The aim of this special edition is to high interesting and timely research that informs good practice; we hope this is of interest and of use to you.

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