



NEW GP TOOLKIT TO ADDRESS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

General Practitioners in Western Australia now have a new toolkit to help patients deal with the growing issue of domestic violence.

Today, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Women's Law Centre of WA has launched *When She Talks to you about the Violence: A Toolkit for GPs in WA* – a set of guidelines to assist doctors to better broach the subject of domestic violence with patients. It will support GPs and other health professionals to adequately identify and better understand family and domestic violence, as well as provide recommendations on how to respond appropriately.

Research has shown that women who suffer domestic violence tend to visit GPs and hospitals more often, yet few are identified and offered support.

The Toolkit, originally developed by the Women's Legal Services NSW and adapted by the Women's Law Centre to suit practitioners in WA, provides practical advice on issues including:

- note-taking for legal purposes
- mandatory reporting
- immigration and family violence provisions
- summons and subpoenas
- ethical issues such as continuing care for the patient, when the patient is the perpetrator, and when both partners are patients.

Every week in Australia, one woman dies at the hands of a current or former partner.

"These fatalities are entirely preventable," said Heidi Guldbaek, spokesperson for the Women's Law Centre of WA.

"It has been estimated that full-time GPs are seeing up to five women per week who have experienced some form of intimate partner abuse, be it physical, emotional or sexual, in the past 12 months," Ms Guldbaek said.

"Women often try to reach out to other people but often we don't know the signs or how to appropriately respond. We therefore become complicit in further perpetuating violence by unknowingly communicating to women that if they disclose their situation to someone, they will not be believed or helped."

Ms Guldbaek explained that our dominant social narrative when it comes to violence against women, has been, 'Why doesn't she just leave?' Unfortunately, this fails to hold the

perpetrator accountable, can conceal or make the violence seem mutual, and essentially blames the victim.

“If we are to avoid complicity in perpetuating this social problem, we as individuals and professionals need to start resisting such ingrained narratives and instead ask, ‘Why does he abuse?’ and, ‘What is he doing to keep her from leaving?’,” Ms Guldbaek said.

“Coercive and controlling behaviour is the hallmark of family violence. Moreover the fear that this behaviour instils in women operates to keep them psychologically captive in many ways, thereby making it hard for them to seek help.

“For this reason alone, it is important that we make our professional environments and practices conducive to disclosure, so that when clients do confide in us, we believe them and respond appropriately,” Ms Guldbaek said.

Research shows that positive social responses to victims’ disclosures foster resilience, encouraging them to seek help in the future. A negative social response can often be more distressing than the actual act of violence, and is more likely to make the victim feel responsible for her own abuse.

Domestic violence can manifest in various ways including verbal abuse and threats, coercion and financial control to severe physical violence with the end result being fatal.

Fact File

- The Women’s Law Centre of WA is a community legal centre providing legal assistance services to women who face disadvantage.
- The GP Toolkit can be downloaded from www.wlcwa.org.au

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