



KAREN FLANAGAN summarises her recently published paper

## Intervention with sexually abusive young people in Australia and New Zealand

This article is a summary of one of three invited papers commissioned for a special issue of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, that focused on current interventions with sexually abusive young people.

The journal issue was prompted by an event in the United Kingdom where an 11-year-old boy was murdered by an 18-year-old (DM) who was subsequently convicted of his murder and rape. The rape conviction was subsequently overturned on appeal. The 18-year-old had a long history of time in care and had received specialist residential treatment for sexually aggressive behaviour problems. The case had a very high profile and led to a review of services in the UK for young abusers (see "Childhood Lost" 2001). The review and subsequent report raised, amongst other issues, questions about the progress or lack of service provision for young abusers in the United Kingdom.

The author (Karen Flanagan) was asked by the editors of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression* to read the review report and draw out similarities with the issues faced in Australia and New Zealand, to comment on her experiences of working with young people with sexually abusive behaviours, and to review progress in this developing area of practice.

At the time of writing the article, the author was the Manager of the Sexual Abuse Counselling and Prevention Program (SACPP), run by the Children's Protection Society in Melbourne, Victoria. The program, established in 1993, is one of only a few working with victims of sexual abuse and young sexual abusers in a holistic and integrated manner. That is, the service works with all family members and the relevant professional systems that may be involved with the family, such as the education sector, mental health and child protection services. Further, the program takes an integrated approach such that sibling victims and perpetrators are both assessed and treated. This is in contrast to some programs that refer the victims for support elsewhere, focusing attention on the sexually abusive young person.

Overall, the article provides a review of the development and current state of treatment programs for young people with sexually abusive behaviours in Australia and New Zealand (as of 2003). To ensure the accuracy of the assessment, personal contact was made with every relevant service provider in Australian and New Zealand. Each operational program was summarised according to the nature of the program, their target client group, and preferred methods of therapeutic intervention. Evaluation and program outcomes were addressed where information was available.

The main findings of the service review were that in the last decade a growing number of programs have been independently developed and established across Australia and New Zealand. This development can be characterised as relatively uncoordinated and involving limited collaboration between states and countries. This is in part due to geographical challenges and the differing policy agendas operating in different jurisdictions. Further, there was some evidence from the programs that practitioners in this still-emerging field are developing greater confidence as to what works with adolescents engaging in sexually abusive behaviours.

However, a number of significant gaps in service delivery were also identified. These included a lack of services for younger children (aged ten years and under) with sexualised behaviours, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth, females, and adolescents with an intellectual disability who engage in sexually abusive behaviours.



The most pressing need articulated by most service providers was for young people to be able to access programs in a timely manner when sexually abusive behaviours are discovered (a resourcing issue), together with the need for the earliest possible identification and intervention with children who engage in sexualised behaviour.

The complexities of the various legal systems were also identified as hindering practice. This related specifically to the issue of mandated versus voluntary clients. While some practitioners take the view that sexually abusive young people should be prosecuted and provided treatment as mandatory clients, others see the need to cater for the needs of voluntary, non-convicted perpetrators. For example, the Children's Protection Society takes both voluntary and involuntary clients, and has had many children and families seek assistance voluntarily. This fits with an early intervention preventative approach to reduce the risk of further abuse/harm being perpetrated. One problem for voluntary clients is that it is more difficult to access services, with mandatory clients taking precedence.

Finally, the need for effective evaluation and ongoing research was noted as a means of accurately determining what works with specific client groups, including both voluntary and non-voluntary clients.

With regard to therapeutic approaches, it was recommended that a holistic approach to the treatment of children and young people engaging in these behaviours be employed, where there is active involvement not only of the young person, but also of their parents and caregivers, in order to sustain change.

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Further, the benefits reportedly derived from New Zealand's recent development of a national strategy led to the recommendation that Australian programs should collaborate more effectively in order to drive a national strategy for the ongoing development of programs for children and adolescents with sexually abusive behaviours. It was argued that such a strategy, involving all existing service providers active in the field, could better address the identified service gaps and lead to the development of prevention and early intervention programs that can reduce the incidence of sexual abuse in Australia.

The incentive to work towards this is driven by the knowledge that tragedies such as the DM case can be avoided if young people are identified early and are supported to cease their sexually abusive behaviours in a systematic and holistic manner.

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The full paper, entitled "Intervention with sexually abusive young people in Australia and New Zealand", by Karen Flanagan, was published in *the Journal of Sexual Aggression*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 135-149, November 2003, published by Brunner Routledge, Taylor & Francis Health Sciences.

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