

Running up the White Ribbon

The days of family violence being kept an in-house secret are coming to an end, writes CLAIRE HALLIDAY.

WHEN Victoria Police Deputy Commissioner Kieran Walshe recently announced that assaults in Melbourne's central business district had fallen by 14 per cent in the past 12 months, he did it with an obvious pride, keen to go on record with his belief that officers' hard work was paying off.

Behind the closed doors of Melbourne's suburbs, though, reported incidences of family violence are up – a climb of 7.7 per cent in the same period and one that is pushing already-stretched support services to their limit.

With the pressure sure to increase on Victoria's 23 suburban and rural crisis accommodation refuges, White Ribbon Day (Thursday, November 25) aims to further raise awareness of domestic violence.

There was no such thing as White Ribbon Day when I was 19. It took until 1991 for that idea to be launched by a handful of Canadian men on the second anniversary of one man's massacre of 14 women in Montreal, with the aim was to urge men to speak out against violence against women.

When I was 19, it probably wouldn't have been something I related to, anyway.

I had not long moved to Sydney, given up a good job for the prospect of nothing but a charismatic man and the mirage of big-city opportunity – somewhere far from everything I knew. Freedom.

In the first couple of months, with no jobs to tie us down, we spent most minutes of every day together, and when he didn't want to change that – didn't want me to go away from him, and made sure he knew where I was going if I did – I thought it was because he cared. I'd already missed at least two signs on the warning signals checklist available on the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service website but, back then, when I was 19, nobody had heard of the internet.

Over the next 18 months, in Sydney, away from my family and friends, I bumped into many more of those warning signals, not really understanding what they were. By then it was too late.

I'd moved further down the list:

- Does he verbally degrade your self-worth by constantly putting you down?
- Does your talking to members of the opposite sex result in unfounded jealousy and suspicion that is out of proportion?
- Has he ever threatened to leave you?
- Has he ever pushed, shoved, slapped, pinched, punched, or physically hurt you?
- Does he blame you for his anger or violence – saying it was your fault?

In Australia, 900 women, each day, will experience domestic violence, and each week, one will die.

In August this year, VicHealth chief executive Todd Harper addressed about 250 interested experts, local council representatives and health professionals at the inaugural Preventing Violence Against Women Conference and said the most chilling fact was that domestic violence is the leading cause of poor health in young Australian women.

Accounting firm KPMG estimates an annual community cost of about \$14 billion (\$3.4 billion in Victoria alone). Harper says that,

human rights issues aside, economics is one good reason for action.

When I was 20 and trying to leave my own situation, the worry that it would get worse was my reason. His tears always followed mine, though. He didn't mean it. He needed help to control his anger. He was sorry.

At the 24-hour, statewide Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service, chief executive Deb Bryant is tired of hearing domestic violence excused because of issues around "anger management" or "losing control". "Somebody can be angry, but somebody chooses to use violence. It's a choice they make," she says. "If a husband is doing it with his wife but he's choosing not to do it with his boss at work or his friends, that's not losing control. That's a choice."

While services in the past have targeted women needing support to leave violent relationships, Bryant says that there has been a recent push to implement programs for boys – teaching them, at a primary level, about respectful behaviour towards women.

HOME TRUTHS

FAMILY VIOLENCE IN AUSTRALIA

7.7%

The increase in reported incidences of family violence in the past 12 months.

900

The number of women who experience domestic violence daily in Australia.

1

The number of women who will die each week in Australia from domestic violence.

22%

The increase in the reporting of family violence over the past six years.

Today, the White Ribbon campaign in Australia is led by more than 1000 ambassadors – men who are leaders in their careers, sporting code or communities and who actively support the White Ribbon.

"All men must take responsibility for this issue," says VicHealth's Todd Harper.

If I felt ashamed, I shouldn't have. According to Deb Bryant, there is no typical victim of domestic violence.

"If you looked at our stats, you would say that the majority of women who come to our service are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, that they are less educated, that they come from particular suburbs – all the stereotypical things. But the only typical thing that makes them show up with us is that they have less access to other resources," says Bryant.

A Toorak postcode or a university degree won't stop you getting hit by a controlling partner, she says. The only difference is that those women often have the financial resources and the established networks of family and friends to enable them to extricate themselves without the reliance on crisis refuges.

Rich or poor, says Bryant, one thing that is typical is that it may take six to 10 attempts for a woman to leave a violent relationship.

"I don't think it's any easier," she says of the comparison in circumstances and the reason too many women of all socio-economic demographics stay in violent relationships. "It's different. If you do a 'pros and cons' of a woman living in Toorak whose husband is on the A list – they've got the four-wheel drive, the huge mansion, the private school fees. If she leaves, what's she going to lose?"

Bryant has known of a woman whose husband owns a mansion in the inner suburbs "and she's not even allowed in the house". "She was living in what would have been the old servant's quarters," says Bryant. "We don't know if she's still there."

When I eventually called 000, one night when I was 21, the police who I thought would rescue me stayed just long enough to scare him away and tell me that I should hurry up and get my things from the house before he came back. I packed in the dark, my bloodied nose staining my clothes, before calling a friend's mother to meet me at the hospital.

Those things have changed. The term "domestic dispute", pushed from police vocabulary under former commissioner Christine Nixon, has made way for family violence to be recognised as the crime it is.

Over the past six years, reporting of family violence increased by 22 per cent from about 28,000 incidents to 34,000 in 2008-09. It's a sign that, while it is clearly still on the increase, so too, is the recognition that women shouldn't deal with it alone. \

editorial@theweeklyreview.com.au

FOR SUPPORT AND HELP

Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service Victoria
1800 015 188 www.wdvcs.org.au

Men's Referral Service: 1800 065 973
www.mrs.org.au

White Ribbon Day www.whiteribbonday.org.au