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Recognising and responding to domestic violence: Exploring the role of student dentists

The value of student dentists in recognising, responding and potentially reducing the incidence of domestic violence in regional and rural communities has not been explored in Australia. While dental curricula includes medico-legal, ethical and clinical management of adult and paediatric trauma, anecdotal reports from student dentists indicate that they feel inadequately prepared for responding appropriately in both clinical practice and the community to women who experience domestic violence. This presentation will report on an innovative partnership between the James Cook University Dentistry, Social Work and the Cairns Regional Domestic Violence Service to address this problem.

This mixed methods research project was conducted by Year 4 dental students who practice clinically. Using pre and post intervention surveys and focus groups, the researchers aimed to identify and document undergraduate dental surgery students' understanding of domestic violence and how prepared they felt for recognising and responding within a clinical setting to women who experience domestic violence. The intervention involved a 'Recognise and Respond to Domestic Violence' workshop delivered by expert facilitators for Bachelor of Dental Surgery students in Years 3 – 5. Knowledge and perceptions before and after the workshop were compared and contrasted. Focus groups enriched the evaluation data on the value and effectiveness of the intervention for clinical practice.

Preliminary findings indicate that all workshop participants developed knowledge and awareness around recognising forms of domestic violence and were enabled to embed this into their clinical assessment. However, while empathy was evident, students' ability to capably and confidently respond requires further development. Identified differences in responses between students in clinical years 3, 4 and 5 of the dental program will inform plans for further learning activities around domestic violence within the curriculum. In particular, a focus on the role of dentists in regional, rural and remote communities will be included.

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Domestic violence order: how effective it is? A real case scenario

A domestic violence order is made by the court to stop threats or acts of domestic violence. It is an official document issued by the court that sets out rules the respondent must obey. A domestic violence order is designed to keep the aggrieved safe by making it illegal for the respondent to behave in specific ways (2016).¹

This is a real case scenario which demonstrates the ineffectiveness of a domestic violence order in terms of protecting the aggrieved from non-physical abuse.