

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

Felicity Croker¹, Ann Carrington¹, S Baker¹, William Shield¹, Casey Burmeister¹, Winson Chan¹

¹James Cook University

The value of dentists, and particularly student dentists, in recognising and appropriately responding to domestic violence in regional, rural and remote 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 appropriately responding and referring women who experience domestic violence. To address this concern, an innovative partnership was formed between the James Cook University Dentistry and Social Work schools and the Cairns Regional Domestic Violence Service. The 'Recognise and Respond to Domestic Violence' workshops were introduced into the clinical years of the dental curriculum in 2016 and evaluated by senior dental students.

Evaluation of this educational initiative was a mixed methods research project conducted in 2016 by Year 4 dental students who practiced 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 how prepared they felt for recognising and responding within a clinical setting to women who experience domestic violence. The intervention involved a program of 'Recognise and Respond to Domestic Violence' workshops delivered by expert facilitators for dental 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 in 2016 indicated that all workshop participants developed knowledge 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 and refer was identified as requiring further development. Differences in responses between students in clinical years 3, 4 and 5 of the dental surgery program informed the planning and co-design of the 2017 scaffolded learning activities around domestic violence within the dental curriculum. The recommendations have led to a scaffolded, bespoke 'Recognise, Respond and Refer' (RRR) program being co-designed, implemented and evaluated in 2017.

Building on the 2016 recommendations, authentic learning and alignment with clinical placements in regional, rural and remote communities has been increased through embedding students' critical reflections on their clinical experiences with domestic violence. Workshop activities have enabled students to strengthen their ability to communicate effectively within the clinical context. Students are also further developing their capacity to provide patient-centred responses and place-based strategies for their placement locations. Ongoing evaluation of the 'recognise, respond and refer' program is in progress and applies the same methodology. This innovative program has the potential to enable graduate dentists to become competent in responding to domestic violence within the clinical context when working in regional, rural and remote communities.

Recommendations for policy include:

- collaborative partnerships with Hospital and Health Services and the Australian Dental Association in consultation with domestic violence services to develop clear guidelines on documentation and referral pathways for dentists in each State or Territory
- endorsing professional development of dentists to be domestic violence champions in rural and remote communities.

Presenter

Dr Felicity Croker is a Senior Lecturer in Dentistry at JCU who is strongly committed to educating a socially accountable health workforce who can contribute effectively to low-resource communities within the tropics. Her work is informed by over 30 years of interprofessional practice, teaching and research in regional, remote and disadvantaged communities within Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Felicity is currently engaged in several collaborative, capacity-strengthening projects that involve students and community partnerships. These include the NHMRC-funded 'Rural engaging communities in oral health' (Rural ECOH) project, mapping graduate intentions and destinations, and the partnership initiative to develop dental students' confidence and competence in recognising and responding to domestic violence.