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Together is the only way to end child abuse

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For 20 years I was a detective in the NSW Police force and for a time specialised in child abuse and sexual assault investigations. Whilst in the force, I was constantly reminded by sexual assault and child abuse experts, particularly in the NSW Health Department, that as a police officer I did not understand the plight of victims. I even recall a group writing an article accusing me of delivering "prescribed advice" to a group of women who were concerned about the potential of sexual assault during a "law and order" electoral campaign.

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This couldn't have been further from the truth. I did understand how it felt to be a victim of sexual abuse. In 1963 my three sisters and I were placed into an orphanage. Along with others in the home, we were all abused in the most horrible manner. Our cries for help were ignored by the institution. Eventually, after many years, the abuser was sent to jail. There was a civil matter that took many more years. At every turn the "caring" institution seemed to stall the process on legal advice. All we ever wanted was some family support. But at every turn we were told "this is a police matter" or "this is a matter for the courts".

The forthcoming royal commission on child sexual abuse is an opportunity to change the way we deal with the child abuse investigations. The statement by Julia Gillard that "too many people have turned a blind eye to the shocking crime of child sexual abuse" hit home with me. Despite my own history, I am as guilty of turning a blind eye as many others.

Over the years the dogmatic approach to this serious social issue lacked both the natural and empirical scientific ingredients that would allow child protection specialists in the public and private sector to manage this problem effectively. The notion that mandatory reporting and demonising offenders would stop child abuse was always an irrational dream. This is particularly the case within an adversarial legal system. The recent action of the Indian defence lawyer, who blamed the deceased victim in a horrible sexual assault on a bus, is all too familiar. It is about the better argument and not the truth. The Australian legal system is exactly the same.

It is from within the Australian criminal justice-legal structure that lawyers have advised the Catholic Church, Barnardo's and numerous other institution that provided care and accommodation for orphaned and abandoned children. The same structure advised institutions how to deal with complaints of abuse that arose from the schooling and foster car process. The advice was typically "admit nothing".

Let's not blame the lawyers on this occasion, although it's hard to ignore their role. Let's look at us all: doctors, nurses, social workers, police, corrections officers, journalists, teachers, and youth workers. How many times have we all hid behind the legal advice of "admit nothing"?

Child abuse is a human rights issue. It is not about gender or sexuality. It is about the universal truth that as human beings we are all equal. Victims should be viewed as genderless; they just want to talk to someone who cares. Both men and women have failed children on numerous occasions across all professions.

The antagonism that exists between social workers and police, with regards to the gathering of forensic evidence and medical examinations of victims, should have been dealt with years ago. Yet it has been ignored.

For healing to be possible, it is in the long-term interests of victims and their families to work together to have an open dialogue about what took place and when. We should also include the perpetrator's family. Let's not forget that

studies show time and time again those perpetrators of sexual abuse were also once victims of it.

Let's hope this royal commission is not turned into a moral panic campaign. The "experts" on child abuse, should include the people who have experienced it themselves. There are serious structural flaws in the child abuse investigation framework in Australia. Let's address those before examining the faults of individuals and individual agencies.

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