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Desi Alexandridis (near left) is Senior Manager, Domestic Violence & Homelessness Services at Centacare Catholic Family Services in South Australia.

Sidebyside

Partners on the ANROWS Research Program project *Seeking help for domestic violence: Exploring rural women's coping experiences* (see opposite), Associate Professor Sarah Wendt (above left) and Desi Alexandridis (above right), speak with us about how their project was conceived and why collaboration between researchers and service providers is so important.

SW My background is in social work and I have always been passionate about promoting the best interests and safety of women and children.

As an undergraduate student I remember writing essays on domestic violence whenever I had the opportunity. I worked in crisis response as a social worker assisting women and their children leaving violent relationships before embarking on a PhD that explored rural women's experiences of domestic violence.

I grew up on a farm and experienced being part of a rural community. Hence, I was keen to highlight the unique issues women faced when experiencing domestic violence in a rural context.

As a researcher I have had the privilege of speaking with diverse communities of women about their experiences of domestic violence. I have always felt it is women's stories that have enabled me to say important things about gender and how gender hides, silences and perpetuates domestic violence.

Professor Donna Chung was one of my earlier supporters, encouraging me to explore domestic violence in rural communities for both my honours and PhD research. This research project has enabled us to collaborate on a topic we have long shared an interest in. Similarly, Associate Professor Lia Bryant is a well-known rural sociologist and her work on gender has assisted my research in the past. I am absolutely thrilled to have them both on my research team.

I always envisioned this research to be a partnership between researchers and service providers. Due to previous successful working relationships with Centacare, who fund and support domestic violence services in rural South Australia, I met with managers from all the different rural sites in South Australia to discuss the project. I received their clear endorsement to explore women's help seeking, disclosure and reporting on domestic violence.

Professor Donna Chung went through a similar process with service providers in Western Australia. All service providers

agreed that it was important to include women from their communities in the project and committed to assisting us in facilitating that process. The excitement and goodwill to explore service provision and support women's participation in the project was evident from the beginning.

This project examines how social and geographical isolation can impact on 'help seeking' and shapes 'coping' for specific groups of women living in rural and remote areas. Research (including my own) has shown that to understand 'help seeking' and 'coping' challenges for Aboriginal women experiencing family violence, it is essential to understand colonisation and its enduring and ongoing impact on Aboriginal communities, families and individuals. Cultural safety is an important theme and we need to continue talking about it.

In this project, we will explore with Aboriginal women their reasons for seeking help, how they sought assistance and what shaped their decision making. We will also look at how they have coped with family violence in their lives,

including periods of time where they did not seek assistance, and what influenced their decision to cope alone.

Guided by the NHMRC *Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* in the development of ethical relationships, I recognise the importance of promoting local relationships to ensure the nuances of judgement and practice and to help promote trustworthiness.

My research team will use the platforms of local agencies (Centacare, Department for Child Protection and Family Support, Aboriginal Family Law Services, Anglicare WA in Derby) to be introduced to local Aboriginal groups (as opposed to cold calling). It is vital that the research design meets the needs of Aboriginal women.

We will work closely with our agency partners to harness local Aboriginal expertise and ensure cultural sensitivity. We will be guided by Aboriginal women and workers to find the best way to interview Aboriginal women and include them in the study.

I have long held the belief that relationships between researchers and service providers make meaningful contributions to the evidence base on violence against women and their children. As a researcher I believe in drawing on the expertise and practice wisdom of service providers to enhance knowledge, understandings and build bridges across a range of disciplines. Collaboration is pivotal in enabling translations of research into practice and policy.

DA I grew up in Port Lincoln in South Australia and began my career in Whyalla. I started my career nearly 30 years ago and it began as a personal journey. I had close friends who had experienced domestic violence and my mother and I had been involved in supporting them. When the opportunity of a professional position came up (I didn't have the training at the time), I applied for the position and got it. My

passion continued to grow as I worked with women experiencing domestic and family violence and saw the positive outcomes our collective work was able to produce.

A deep sense of social justice continues to drive me, as does my sense of needing society to be equal and for women to have the opportunity to live free from violence. I want children to grow up knowing and seeing positive relationships, rather than viewing the world in distorted ways. I want children to grow up feeling safe and knowing that there is an alternative to violence. This keeps me in the job!

The idea of this project actually developed quite fortuitously. I work at Centacare, where we have various domestic and family violence programs catering to different groups of women. One of our program colleagues had initial conversations with Dr Sarah Wendt about partnerships and potential projects. Our interest in her proposed project grew as we learned more about it, and realised how worthwhile it could be.

This project is hoping to answer how social and geographical isolation impacts on service delivery in rural and remote areas. We are also interested in analysing what shapes 'help seeking' and 'coping' for specific groups of women. In my experience, the lack of services is the biggest challenge we face in rural and remote areas. In order to have positive outcomes in these areas, you need the availability of services.

The issue of geographical isolation in rural and remote areas is complex and more so with Aboriginal women. Not only are culturally responsive services few and far between, services also have the challenge of learning how to deliver services that honour kin and family obligations within Aboriginal communities.

Working with Aboriginal women, especially younger Aboriginal women, I have found that social and cultural responsibilities within the family and kin context are a challenge for them to

seek help. It also impacts on their ability to stay within the service after seeking initial assistance. Younger Aboriginal women feel obliged to tell their families and broader networks where they are and who they are seeking assistance from. As service providers, we need to recognise the importance of family obligations while keeping Aboriginal women safe in culturally secure ways.

When working with Aboriginal women, it is crucial to have a good understanding of cultural heritage, as well as empathy towards past, current, lived and vicarious trauma. We must be attuned to the experience of colonisation, the cultural memory of the stolen generations, and Aboriginal women's experiences with government departments such as Child Protection.

We also have to be flexible in our service delivery. Aboriginal women don't have to fit our domestic violence service model, we need to fit within their experiences of violence. Some of our services have worked to come up with innovative solutions grounded in culturally responsive practices. For example, in our outreach with younger Aboriginal women, we have allowed families to stay at the properties. Normally our policies and process for outreach programs do not allow for families to stay with survivors/victims. We made exceptions for Aboriginal women so they can stay with their mothers, sisters and aunts.

We work very closely with Centacare's team of cultural consultants, drawing on their knowledge and bringing them in at a practical level to advise on culturally responsive and secure service provision.

I have always held the view that it is imperative to have partnerships between service providers, agencies, and researchers. As service providers, we develop our service delivery models on evidence. We welcome opportunities to work with researchers, as together we are able to develop best practice models for working with women experiencing violence. ●