

**SEXUAL ASSAULT SUPPORT SERVICES 30TH ANNIVERSARY  
REMARKS BY  
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM  
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA  
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, WEDNESDAY 14TH DECEMBER 2016**

Good evening. Dick and I warmly welcome you to this Government House reception to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sexual Assault Support Services.

May I begin by paying my respects to the Mouhaneener People, their community, and elders past, present and future, as the original and continuing custodians of the land on which we meet.

What a milestone 30 years is. Can I specially acknowledge SASS's four founding members: Terese Henning, Michelle Moseley, Christine Tilley and Jenny Wilson.

Michele has put together an early history of SASS which I have used in preparing my remarks. So it was in April 1986 after many years of strenuous lobbying, that Terese, Michelle, Christine and Jenny were granted \$107,862 to establish SASS. Terese, Christine and Michelle met in the early 80s through the Women's Electoral Lobby.

Terese and Christine were law students with a particular interest in sexual assault law reform and Michelle worked in the area of employment and training, policy and programs and in her words 'was keen to be involved in establishing a new support service for women from the ground up'. Together with Jenny they formed a new lobby group some years after Women Against Rape was disbanded.

In the 1980s rape and sexual assault was still a largely hidden crime although feminists had been lobbying for some years for law reform. In October 1979 the Attorney-General, Brian Miller, referred the matter of reform of rape and sexual offences to the Law Reform Commission with a particular reference to the marital immunity rule and rules of evidence and procedure applicable to sex offences.

The first step the Commission took as a means of public consultation was to organise, with the Australian Institute of Criminology and the University, a 'National Rape Conference' in Hobart in 1980 which was attended by some 200 people judges, lawyers, academics, police officers, social workers, health workers, representatives of women's organisations and health centres. I was there – then a casual lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Law. For me this conference was a revelation, to quote Julian Burnside, a 'porridge moment'.

So I had my porridge moment at the National Rape Conference. After the publication of the conference papers the Commission engaged me to prepare a working paper with options for reform. It also set out the existing position in relation to medical and community support for rape victims and noted that despite the fact that the Minister for Health had in March 1978 publicly announced that the major public hospitals in Hobart, Launceston and the North-West had set up special rape counselling and care services for rape victims, this still had not happened by April 1981 with the exception of the North-West General.

It was argued by the Royal Hobart Hospital that the small number of sexual assaults did not warrant a centre to deal exclusively with sexual assault.<sup>1</sup> The hospital was unwilling to change its current system of rape victims presenting to casualty. The working paper noted not only the absence of a hospital based sexual assault centre, but also the absence of an autonomous rape crisis centre. The National Conference resolutions had called on the government to fund both, hospital based centres and autonomous rape crisis centres to give victims a choice of service.

Contemporary arguments in favour of independent rape crisis centres noted in the paper included that hospitals should not be the sole option; some victims do not require medical treatment; some doctors and nurses are unsympathetic; that hospitals reinforce a sense of helplessness defeating a woman regaining a sense of control over her own life and that privacy is a problem in hospitals.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Warner, *Working Paper on Rape Law Reform*, Law Reform Commission of Tasmania, April 1981, p 71.

<sup>2</sup> Warner, n 1, p 77.

Arguments against rape crisis centres included that police generally believed such centres were inhibiting factors in rape investigations because of delays in reporting to police and because counsellors discourage reporting. Some opponents complained of the radical feminism and anti-male outlook of those running centres.

The Final Report and Recommendations of the TLRC were published in December 1982. At this stage there was still not even a hospital-based sexual assault centre at the Royal, and the Commission recommended that this should be prioritised ahead of an autonomous rape crisis centre given the limited finances available for such services.<sup>3</sup>

This gives you some indication of the obstacles facing the creation of a rape crisis centre. Michelle notes that there were suspicions that the rape problem was a beat-up and that a rape crisis centre would not only discourage victims to report to the police and but would also encourage the making of false allegations. This was a time when the prevailing view was rape is an allegation so easily made and difficult to refute.

When sexual assault was acknowledged as a problem requiring action, the Law Reform Commission's response shows the solution was seen in legal or medical terms.

Finding a source of a funding was a problem. It was a new community-based service that didn't fit neatly into the existing funding categories. For its founders this meant numerous meetings with Commonwealth and State officers in search of a funding source as well as political lobbying. Despite it not being a perfect fit in the end it was the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) that provided the funding.

The first support workers were Chris Chaffey and Julie Forsyth and Janine Combes was the first Director. Janine was highly respected and in her time as Director clear protocols were established between the Hospital, Police and SASS.

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<sup>3</sup> Tasmanian Law Reform Commission, *Report and Recommendation on Rape and Sexual Offences*, Report No 31 (1982).

Thirty years have seen a succession of directors, board members and counsellors. Today SASS is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services – it delivers a 24 hour phone crisis response program; a 24 hour phone support and counselling service to people affected by sexual abuse; and face to face information, support, counselling and referral services to anyone affected by sexual abuse.

In addition it performs a range of functions such as submissions to inquiries. An example is the submission to the Senate Inquiry into 'Revenge Porn' earlier this year. It also offers community education and training programs to schools and over the years has been engaged in a huge range of projects, most recently the Pathways to Change Project which was to make recommendations for a statewide approach to problem sexualised behaviour and sexually abusive behaviour perpetrated by children and young people. Another recent project was a media campaign in collaboration with the Drug Education Network: 'Off your head don't share your bed' which does not require me to elaborate further.

It has been an amazing 30 years, so well done to all of those who have been associated with SASS over the years. And thank you on behalf of your many thousands of clients whom you have supported to deal with the effects of sexual abuse.

Thank you.