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Local domestic and family violence program expands to support victim survivors of sexual assault and child sexual abuse

On Thursday, 26 September, Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, together with Federal Member for Macquarie, Susan Templeman MP, were proud to launch the expansion of the Care and Connect domestic and family violence program to include sexual violence and child sexual abuse.

The Care and Connect Program, funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care, through the Supporting Primary Care response to Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Pilot initiative, supports primary healthcare professionals working in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas to identify, respond and support victim-survivors.

Research conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. A report by the Special Taskforce on Domestic Violence in Queensland has identified many of those impacted by domestic, family and sexual violence seek support from a health professional as the first point of contact, with some GPs estimated to be seeing one to two women per week who have been impacted by these issues.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said despite statistics, sexual violence and child sexual abuse often goes unreported. She said that and the expansion launch was an opportunity to talk about the prevalence of sexual violence and child sexual abuse within the community, and to highlight how Care and Connect can support primary healthcare professionals and by extension, their patients.

“It is important that primary healthcare professionals are supported to identify the signs and to respond appropriately to patients impacted by sexual violence and child sexual abuse as in some cases, they may be the first point of contact for victim-survivors,” she said.

“For many health professionals, when they undertook their training the issue of domestic, family and sexual violence was not covered in any depth. While times are changing in the health education sector, there is sometimes a gap of knowledge for clinicians in this area. This program plans to address this by giving health professionals the tools to ask patients the right questions and the confidence that they have the resources to support any patients impacted,” she said.

Ms Reay explained the Care and Connect Program delivers a two-pronged approach. Firstly, providing training to primary healthcare professionals including GPs, practice nurses, practice staff and others, and secondly providing Care and Connect Linkers through Relationships Australia NSW who primary healthcare professionals can seek advice from or refer patients to.

“Care and Connect Linkers are specially trained domestic, family and sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, support workers who can help support victim-survivors to navigate what can sometimes be an overwhelming process,” she said.



“They can help with disclosures, safety planning, apprehended violence orders, housing, counselling, financial management and more. They can also provide referrals to behaviour change programs for users of violence,” she added.

Care and Connect Linkers can co-locate at general practices, with six local practices in the region currently hosting Linkers, to make access even easier for both GPs, nurses and also victim-survivors.

The launch event featured key speakers in the industry and highlighted the importance of understanding the prevalence of sexual violence and child sexual abuse in the community. It also offered a valuable opportunity for health professionals to learn how the program can support their efforts in recognising and appropriately addressing these significant issues.

Ms Reay said that Primary Health Networks have the unique position of working with and supporting primary healthcare while at the same time being a commissioner of frontline community-based services.

“This means that we have a crucial role in helping to identify health service gaps and a unique opportunity to bring the pieces of the health puzzle together, at a local level, to help integrate the care response for some of our society’s most vulnerable,” said Ms Reay.

“The Care and Connect Program is a great example of how we can work together to integrate the response for victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence, ensuring they get holistic care from all the different services and agencies they often need in order to deal with their circumstances,” she said.

Ms Reay emphasised that if you are affected by domestic, family, or sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, talking to your GP can be a safe place to start your help seeking journey.

“Many people might not know that their GP can be a safe first point of contact for those facing domestic, family, or sexual violence or child sexual abuse. With support through the Care and Connect Program, we are increasing the knowledge and resources GPs and other primary healthcare professionals have access to in order to help address this important issue,” said Ms Reay.

To learn more about the program visit www.nbmphn.com.au/CareandConnect

For more, including quotes from Susan Templeman MP, Member for Macquarie, read the Hon Ged Kearney MP, Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care and Assistant Minister for Indigenous Health, [media release dated 26 September 2024](#).

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