

CHRISTABEL CHAMARETTE AND SAFE CARE



I'm glad people are more aware of the problem (of child sex abuse), but we now have to move towards further understanding and away from knee-jerk reactions. It should be self-evident we also need to look at a healing approach.

Sex abuse perpetrated by church officials has in recent years hit the headlines, forcing attention both on this most personal and devastating violence and on urgent efforts by churches and other agencies to address their protocols and pastoral practice. Yet the vast majority of child sexual offending occurs behind the closed doors of the family home: conservative estimates indicating that 1-in-4 girls and 1-in-5 boys have been sexual abused, mostly by close family members and acquaintances. Sometimes the offenders are themselves young teenagers, drawn into the cycle of abused and abuser. Sadly however punitive measures seem to do little to break this cycle of abuse. **Christabel Chamarette** however, in her work in Western Australia as Clinical Director of **SafeCare**, promotes another way forward, deeply consonant with the principles of restorative justice and the spirit of the *Decade to Overcome Violence*.

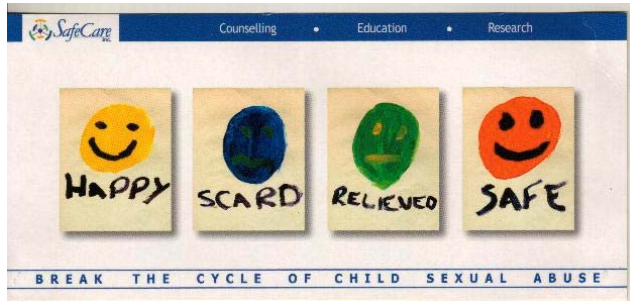
Christabel herself is a registered Clinical Psychologist with 30 years experience in the treatment of violence and sexual problems and of adult/child sexual abuse victims and offenders, ranging from working in a male maximum security prisons to working with women victims. Formerly a Greens Senator for Western Australia (1991-96), she is also a Principal Member of the Parole Board of Western Australia, a Consultant to Department of Justice, a Clinical Supervisor at the YMCA, and a member of the Anglican Church of Australia's Professional Standards Committee for Western Australia. It is from this wide and deep personal experience and commitment to overcoming family violence that she offers a new path. For, as she says:



*'The demonisation of pedophiles – picturing them as strangers who stalk children in play grounds, public toilets or as the local priest systematically abusing young members of the congregation, fails to acknowledge the reality of child sexual offending... **Everyday I see how punitive approaches prevent families seeking help and how the lack of treatment and support options continue the cycle of offending. Criminal justice approaches lead to negative outcomes not just for the offender but for the whole family. There is nothing inherently healing in punishing the offender. Many victims I have worked with want the offending to stop, but do not want to forego a valued relationship with a close care-giver. I've seen victims who are totally unprepared for the disintegration of the family caused by punitive responses that follow disclosure. They retract their allegations, and other children may then never disclose their own abuse.***

Christabel and *SafeCare*'s approach is thus to work with all family members where the offender takes responsibility for the offending and is willing to enter a treatment program. It uses the positive motivation within families to work with both victims and offenders.

SafeCare - Breaking the Cycle of Child Sexual Abuse in Australia



SafeCare (formerly the *Sexual Assault in Families Program*) has been in existence since 1989 and is a private non-profit organisation which provides treatment, counselling and support services to families where child sexual abuse by a family member has occurred or where it is feared that it may occur. Employing

the highest possible professional standards and legal accountability, *SafeCare*'s approach critically involves: the offender taking responsibility; a community-based, whole family approach, with all family members receiving treatment and support; voluntary rather than coercive participation. In doing so, safety and care are dynamically combined.

'Most weeks you could visit my place of work and find a large room bursting with the energy of half a dozen teenage boys... Their parents meet next door... And their smaller brothers and sisters are at play in the Crèche. This is probably a rather different image of child sexual abuse from the usual.' (Christabel Chamarette)

Such an approach challenges preconceptions and prejudices. Christabel recalls feminist complaints at the start of *SafeCare* that *'No offender should get treatment until all the victims have been treated'*. However, says Christabel, *'while this sounds supportive of victims ... it fails to recognise that you would never treat all the victims if you put the offenders at the back of the queue because without treatment offending continues'*. More recently, *SafeCare* was attacked by the State Opposition during an election campaign for supposedly undermining the criminal justice system. Yet *SafeCare*, which has also been publicly praised by former federal community services minister Amanda Vanstone, confirms by its results the success of such whole-family and early intervention programs. As Christabel affirms about this pioneering work:

Child sexual offending is learned in early childhood. No one is born to offend. Not all victims go on to offend, but almost all offenders have been victims. To say that offenders do not deserve help or are untreatable condemns both victims and offenders to repeating the intergenerational cycle. The adult community needs to take responsibility for keeping children safe and helping offenders to stop offending rather than placing the responsibility on children to protect themselves. Surely we all would be better served by a public health response that protects children and assists families rather than punitive criminal justice responses that do nothing to break the cycle of child sexual abuse.

Significantly, and in accord with developments such as Circle Sentencing, interest has thus also been expressed by Indigenous women, seeing a way to address family violence without reinforcing the shattering of family bonds and perpetuating abuse.

Sources and more information:

www.safecare.com.au

www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s562589.htm