

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR TORTURE AND TRAUMA REHABILITATION SERVICES

By Michael Bromhead

Last November about one hundred and forty staff members from torture and trauma services around Australia and New Zealand gathered for the conference of the Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT).

The eight trauma services in Australia are members of the FASSTT and through their respective Directors work on projects, lobby governments, share ideas and, most importantly, support each other's work.

As suggested by the theme of the conference, 'Aiming High: Towards Benchmarks in National Service Provision', the meeting was the starting point in the development of national service standards that will provide a benchmark for delivering quality services to survivors of torture and trauma across Australia. Members of Forum believe that the development of national standards of service delivery will place the FASSTT in a better position to gain funding for national projects, strengthen the national network and exchange staff between agencies. It will also contribute to presenting a well-coordinated national network in international forums and conferences.

The meeting took place at the Rutherford Park Country Retreat, near the spa resort towns of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs in central Victoria – a perfect location for discussion, contemplation, standardisation and karaoke

renditions! It gave staff participants an opportunity to explore commonalities in their work, the different methods used in service delivery and share thoughts and ideas about some of the complex and disturbing issues relevant in our work today.

But it was also fun. It was kicked off with a trivia quiz that also attempted to set new standards in fashion and even revealed some dark personal secrets about some of our directors, who shall remain nameless to protect their right to privacy and to avoid potential blackmail!

An attempt was also made to set standards in hair colour. But because there was only a minority of participants who could present their original hair colour, let alone enough hair, it was not possible to establish any clear standards.

Much of the meeting was conducted in the form of workshops focusing on specific service categories and agency functioning. Topics ranged from clinical and group work for children and adolescents to Complementary Therapy approaches, issues, administration, training and research and early intervention methods. Crossing through most of these topic areas were our difficulties in providing services to asylum seekers, particularly Temporary Protection Visa holders (TPVs). It was often said that we could have easily committed the four days to the issues we face assisting TPV holders.

Consultant John Clarke, spoke about the rationale for establishing service standards, about the need for agencies to make a recorded commitment to their clients, staff,

funding bodies and other service providers about what exactly they seek to deliver. This commitment, according to John, communicates the agencies' values, operating framework and standards to others, whilst also establishing guidelines for evaluating the service.

Annarella Hardiman and Cath Dean spoke about their experience writing the National Standards of Practice Manual for the National Association of Services against Sexual Violence. They presented a practical example of the challenges involved in establishing national service standards. For instance, finding a common expression for the philosophy of service was one of their challenges, as well as establishing a standard of access and equity, given the diverse locations and methods used by numerous agencies throughout the country. Cath and Annarella also spoke of the benefit of establishing clear decision making processes and identifying the common and unifying practices, rather than the differences.

Jorge Aroche, Director of STARTTS, said that service standards were needed for the preservation of the services to vulnerable refugees. "We have had a good run," he said. "The compelling nature of the work that we do, and our small size in budgetary terms have meant that funding bodies have taken our claims about the quality of our service pretty much at face value. Of course, we deserve this level of trust, but to count on this continuing would be both naïve and overly complacent, particularly given the current political climate and the public mood about



refugees. We need to demonstrate that we can provide good quality services reliably across the nation.”

All the participants shared their experiences, wrestled with the challenges, and contemplated dinner and the evening festivities. When not daydreaming about their upcoming karaoke debuts or gazing out the window to the rolling hills of country Victoria, they identified the principles that applied to their work, the standards required in achieving those principles and the strategies we needed to achieve the standards. It is beyond the scope of this article to express all the principles identified by the groups, but the sample in the box will provide a flavour of each group’s endeavours.

All in all, the conference was a great opportunity for creating or strengthening the ties between agencies, service areas, for sharing ideas, and examining once again what we do, why we do it and how we do it best. ■

Principles

Administration: “All clients of the agency are treated with respect, dignity and equity.”

Adolescents: “We take a holistic approach to each young person.”

Adults and long term interventions: “Our services are open to all adult survivors of torture and trauma.”

Children: “Every child is treated as an individual with individual needs.”

Early Health Assessment and Intervention: “Our practice empowers the client.”

Complementary Therapies: “Complementary Therapies are a valued part of the suite of integrated services contributing to the recovery of survivors of torture and trauma.”

Research: “Research is conducted within an ethical framework.”

These principles will lead to a comprehensive range of standards and strategies that will be compiled into a report to be ratified by the NFSSTT.