

# Probing the dark secret of family violence

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If there is one thing that should emerge from the state's royal commission into family violence it would be a comprehensive and effective strategy for early intervention, a system that might help professionals to act when they detect a person is being abused or is in danger within the home. Every day, teachers and doctors, mental health counsellors and police glimpse the tormented lives of families, yet there is no co-ordinated system for them to raise alarms.

How that might be done, and whether it is even practical, is likely to rank high among the many issues that Justice Marcia Neave and her fellow commissioners will consider in the next 12 months. Theirs is an extraordinarily broad and complex mandate, and anyone expecting a "solution" to family violence simply does not understand the prevalence or insidious nature of this crime. In 2013, 44 Victorians were killed in incidents arising from family violence. In the 12 months to June 2014, more than 65,000 reports of family violence were handled by Victoria Police, up from 60,500 the previous year and 35,700 in 2009-10.

These figures suggest Victorians are more ready to report violence within the home than they were five years ago, but they also raise fundamental questions about whether the existing deterrence strategies are having much effect. **What is needed is profound cultural change as well as constant reinforcement of the message that violence is not, and never will be, acceptable in our community or in our homes.** It is a crime on the street, punishable by jail, and it must be recognised for the crime that it is in the home.

Family violence, though, is not limited to physical assaults; it can involve psychological abuse, intimidation and the denial of financial support. The triggers can be anything and come at any time: drug or alcohol abuse, financial or emotional stress, mental illness and so on.

Nor is family violence simply an issue about failing to control anger. Family violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women, and it tends to reflect deepseated, but wrong-headed, presumptions about entitlement, implied rights and the roles of men and women.

The Neave royal commission is expected to examine all sorts of policies and strategies that might prevent family violence, as well as probe the adequacy of support services for people affected by family violence, the policing and justice responses, and the coordination of government-based operations with community and welfare agencies.

What will become glaringly obvious is the disjointed nature of the existing services. Much is being done, but in a piecemeal fashion and by an array of agencies. Refuge services and counselling agencies urgently need funding and government assistance. At

the same time, the police and courts are being swamped with applications for intervention orders to bar violent offenders from the home.

Premier Daniel Andrews is to be congratulated for establishing this inquiry, delivering a promise he made in May. He has vowed to implement all its recommendations – a brave but admirable commitment at this early stage – but he must eventually follow up with proper funding for its proposals.

So far, no jurisdiction in the world has got its responses right on family violence. This inquiry has a chance to put Victoria on the map. It is being watched closely to see if it can generate sustainable and effective methods for tackling the scourge of violence. Success would be reflected in far fewer deaths and injuries, fewer family breakdowns (with the financial calamity that can bring), and in improvements to lost work hours. But it will also be apparent in the way we speak to each other, in the higher respect we might offer to our partners or parents, siblings, children or lovers.