

Empowering victims helps sexual assault investigations

With the goal of empowering victims of sexual assault throughout the investigation process, ACT Policing's Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Team (SACAT) – part of the Territory Investigations Group – is responsible for investigating serious sexual assaults, as well as all sexual or physical offences against children in Canberra.

SACAT is separated into two teams; the Adult Sexual Assault Team and the Child Abuse Team. The teams work closely together, however, the divide ensures members of each team become experts in the techniques of their field.

Investigating sexual offences can have complicating emotional factors which require the specialist teams to ensure their interviewing techniques for both adult and child victims are first rate.

Most recently, Detective Sergeant Antoinette Aquilina and Detective Sergeant Marie Bond of Queensland Police's Child Safety Coordination Unit, who are specifically trained in interviewing children and adults with disabilities, ran a training session with SACAT members, based on current research conducted by Professor Martine Powell of Deakin University. Professor Powell's research focuses



primarily on eyewitness testimony and forensic interviewing of vulnerable groups such as children and persons with an intellectual disability. Overall, the focus of her research has been the identification of factors which make witness testimony more or less reliable, as well as training strategies to improve the competency of forensic interviewers.

The three-day forensic interviewing training, held at the AFP College in Canberra, comprised theory and practical components, focusing on the specific areas of conducting thorough interviews with children in a manner which would not compromise the admissibility of evidence.

Detective Sergeant Elias Petropolous, who heads up ACT Policing's Child Abuse Team, said the course built on the team's skills in child interviewing.

"Detective Sergeant Aquilina and Detective Sergeant Bond based their training on an interviewing model that aims to allow police to elicit free narrative from children without using leading or suggestive statements or questions," he said.

"As part of the new model, police will also address protective behaviours with the child, to give them resources to use if they find themselves in a situation where they feel unsafe or uncomfortable.

"For example, it's important children know who they can call on if they are in a situation which worries them. Importantly, some very young children may not be able to identify feelings which they aren't comfortable with, so as part of this new model, police are able to talk through feelings with children, such as butterflies in the stomach or sick feelings, so the children recognise the signs that indicate something is wrong," he said.

Different kinds of specialist skills are required by members of the Adult Sexual Assault Team, according to the

team's leader Detective Sergeant Tony Marmont. He said relationship building was crucial to ensuring victims and witnesses felt comfortable providing details to police about traumatic events.

"The importance of relationship building was really highlighted in a recent lengthy investigation in Canberra, which led to the successful prosecution of a serial offender," he said.

"In this investigation, there were several adult victims of a sexual offender, who committed offences over a four-year period. Police were able to gain the trust of women who had been subject of shocking crimes, and ultimately it was their evidence which saw the offender jailed."

In one of the longest custodial sentences imposed in the ACT for a non-murderous offence, serial rapist Shaun Michael Burke, 32, was sentenced to serve a minimum of 25 years in jail for a series of sexual assaults committed in Canberra's northern suburbs over a 40-month period. The length of the sentence is currently under appeal.

After sentencing on 11 October 2006 the victims told media outside the Supreme Court that "justice has been done" and paid tribute to the police, who were described as "brilliant" — highlighting the importance of good rapport between police and victims.



Gaining the trust of sexual assault victims also requires providing a non-threatening environment in which they feel comfortable.

The Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Team had been investigating the case since the first of the crimes was committed in September 2002.

Case officer Detective Senior Constable Craig Marriott said praise for building such a strong case against Burke should go to the victims, who consented to medical examinations, provided comprehensive statements and patiently assisted investigators as the many elements of the case were brought together for the prosecution.

"In investigating crimes such as this, so much depends on the commitment of victims to ensuring as much evidence is gathered as possible," Senior Constable Marriott said.

"Police are very much aware of how emotionally and physically painful this process can be for victims of sexual assault. It is completely understandable for some victims to become withdrawn and non-communicative. If that happens then all we can do is be patient and understanding, develop a dialogue and rapport with the victim which may lead the women to feel comfortable providing a statement. In this case, investigators were fortunate in having victims who were as determined as we were to ensure that all the evidentiary elements of the case were solidly brought together."

The effect of sexual assault upon victims can be profound. The victims in this particular case ranged in age from 14 to 45, and the court was told how Burke had methodically stalked each one, observing them closely, carefully staking out their houses, planning the attacks and his escape routes.

Burke admitted to the assaults, but also claimed to have no memory of the assaults as he had been under the influence of the drug crystal methamphetamine, or "ice" when he carried out the attacks, a claim that was rejected by the sentencing judge.

As part of the investigation, SACAT had involved other elements of ACT Policing such as Forensic Sciences, Operations Monitoring and Intelligence Support (OMIS), General Duties and the Specialist Response and Security Team.