

# Through my eyes

## A story by Brad Shallies, National Coordinator, Child Protection Operations

As often as I can, I walk around the Child Protection Operations office in Canberra and talk to my colleagues. I derive both pleasure and pride from this type of engagement, asking them what the work of the day is, and how any personal matters that I am aware of are going. I take visual hints from items such as photographs of children or pets, or examples of hobbies, and ask about those aspects of their lives.

I deliberately walk in to the viewing area – an area adjacent to the normal work area that is segregated behind floor-to-ceiling curtains. It is here that I really appreciate how special our people are. I look at the screens and see horrific images and videos of children being sexually exploited.

The children's ages range from babies to pre- and post-pubescent boys and girls. I sit down next to staff and talk to them about the case that the images relate to.

I consider the potential impact of these images on our people, and I am thankful that the AFP had the vision to embed a full time psychologist within Child Protection Operations to ensure the mental wellbeing of those who view this type of material in the execution of their duties. The AFP has a policy of conducting a psychological assessment on staff members before they are permitted to view this kind of material.

Joining the Child Protection Operations portfolio is also a voluntary assignment.

I must admit to also wondering what in humanity has gone wrong to drive this type of depravity. On one of the High Tech Crime marketing posters there is a picture of a very young girl and the caption 'look into the eyes of a child who has been sexually abused and you will see pain'.

I never forget that sentence. I look in to the eyes of the child victims on the screen, contemplate what they are going through and become more determined that we will focus on making a difference. These images also make you appreciate how vulnerable your own children are. It is not about building a wall around them, but I am sure that working in this space heightens your protective behaviours.

In one video that I watched recently, the very young victim was laughing and smiling at the camera, as if it was some type of normal home video. The difference was that she was being sexually molested at the time. The psychology of this crime type intrigues me. What type of normative behaviours are embedding in these children, masking horrendous psychological and physical damage?

This crime type encourages cross-spectrum leadership and innovation. The primary objectives are to seek technological processes that will limit the exposure of our people to this material, while decreasing the time it takes law enforcement to identify, find and rescue exploited children.

I recently attended the 21st Annual Crimes Against Children Conference in Dallas, Texas. I requested that the AFP make a presentation this year in addition to attending. I gave a presentation at the conference on the nature of AFP business in child protection and used a victim identification case study based on image analysis.

The conference has grown rapidly from two presenters and 50 attendees less than a decade ago to more than 3200 attendees in 2009. I met and spoke with many people including law enforcement, technology industry and child protection workers. I think all 3200 were in the main auditorium for the



01: Brad Shallies 02: Excerpt from High Tech Crime marketing poster

opening address. The conference originated and has remained in Texas, hosted by the Dallas Children's Advocacy Centre.

The keynote speaker was a mother who told how her son was

kidnapped at gun-point 30 years ago when he was just 11 years old. He has never been found. Her voice broke when she reminded herself that she was speaking about her own son.

It reminded me of the feelings you experience when looking at the screens in the viewing area and the determination to make a difference. The discussions revealed an incredible level of synergy regarding the challenges that the child protection space faces. Technology is taking a leading role in addressing those challenges.

I decided two things as I left the conference to return home. One, that I was now more focused on the journey ahead - where to take the business, and what we have to do to make that difference. The other is that I am going to go back to the conference in 2010 to make another presentation, to help ensure that the AFP realises its potential to be a leader in the crime type and to spend time with key partners who also attend. We so often under-value the personal relationships we build, but these are critical elements of success.

Being National Coordinator, Child Protection Operations is one of those privileges that life sometimes affords you. That is how I see it through my eyes.

I hope that you enjoy the holiday season, particularly the time you spend with your children; we need to take care of them, they are the future.

02



Look into the eyes of a child who has been sexually abused and you'll see pain—a pain that endures long after the bruises have healed. This pain is compounded by child molesters who create images of the sexual abuse and share them with other child molesters. They trade them in chatrooms and post them on thousands of websites. These people are making money from the pain of children. Help us stop these dangerous criminals.