

Ripple Effect

Right from the start, the Royal Commission established by the Gillard government to report on and redress the horrifyingly extensive sexual abuse of children in the care of churches and other institutions, knew it would need to provide counselling to those who testified-as well as those who had to hear the stories. **Juliette Saly** reports.



GUY LAMOND WAS A YOUNG student at Knox Grammar, a prestigious private boys' school on Sydney's North Shore in the mid-1980s, when he was preyed upon and suffered sexual abuse at the hands of two teachers. Lamond made a complaint to the NSW Police in 2009, which helped ensure the conviction of five former teachers. In February this year he testified publicly about the abuse at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Any elation or catharsis the 41-year-old chef may have felt from telling his story in public was short lived. He likens the downer he experienced to how much of Australia felt at the Sydney Olympics' end in 2000—after all the build-up, the pats on the back, the hype of being in the spotlight—he was back to his normal life.

What was 'normal' though? The depression and anxiety he'd suffered for so long started to recur.

The Royal Commission hearing into Knox Grammar learnt of a decades' long culture of cover-up. The revelations of systematic sexual abuse shocked the Australian public and reignited the traumatic experiences of its victims. Not only did those in power at Knox turn a blind eye to the abuse, but the school even erected a memorial to one of the predatory teachers after his death.

"He touched us all", read the sign on the memorial, on the school gates. It has since been removed.

Lamond told the Royal Commission about the abuse he suffered from teachers Barrie Stewart and Craig Treloar, and how Treloar's sentencing in 2009 to just two years imprisonment was "a joke of the most serious proportions".

He told ASR that reliving his abuse was traumatic and the experience has had a huge impact on his whole life. "My first sexual experience was with a man, as a child—and from a teacher who you are supposed to say yes to to everything."

Lamond and the thousands of other Australians who have so far testified at the Commission either publicly or privately have had the support of ongoing counselling which was made a priority



Knox Grammar preparatory school.

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at the time the Commission was established. Almost one-tenth of the Federal government's initial allocation of \$434.1 million for the Royal Commission was set aside for counselling.

For Lamond, accepting the offer of free counselling was a no-brainer. "[The] anxiety doesn't just stop when the hearing stops," he told ASR. "You see the benefits of talking to someone ... They've [the Royal Commission counsellors] obviously been trained very well, they are just incredibly good at letting you talk."

Lamond says he was also given a range of support material and phone numbers to call should he require further help in the future.

Testifying to the Commission triggered a range

of traumatic memories that also required “Jason” to take advantage of the professional help on offer. Aged 44, Jason lives in Sydney and testified in a private hearing in 2014 about being consistently abused sexually while living in a series of foster homes in the 1970s and 1980s.

“I had about seven or eight different foster families, and probably about three of them were abusive,” he told ASR. “There was a lady [at the private hearing] who said to me that if I needed anything [further] to get in touch ... and [the Royal Commission] got in touch with me a week later,” Jason says.

More than 30,000 Australians came forward with



For many, reading about and watching the media reports triggered their own memories of abuse.

information when the Royal Commission was first established in 2013. They included victims, family and friends of those who had been abused, and members of the public who felt they had something to report. As of March 2015, 3096 child sexual abuse victims had testified in a private hearing to one of the Commissioners, and 380 victims at a public hearing, after first recounting their abuse to a Commission investigator. All who testified were offered counselling, with the Commission confirming to ASR that around 90 per cent—some 2700 people—have taken up the offer.

Karen Willis, Executive Officer of Rape and Domestic Violence Services Australia (R&DVSA), formerly the NSW Rape Crisis Centre, says there was never any doubt in her mind that the need for trauma counselling would be vast.

“I’d like to say it was a shock [that so many people sought help] but unfortunately it wasn’t,” Willis told ASR. “Our organization has been working with adult survivors of child sexual assault for the last 40 years, from the day we first started answering the phones, so the sort of issues we have been presented with [from the Commission] is day-to-day work for us.”

Even before the Royal Commission handed down its first report in March 2014, the effects of the hearings were being felt around the country. Nightly news reports of children being abused while in the care of churches, the Salvation Army, schools, Aboriginal communities and foster homes were shocking for television viewers. For many, reading about and watching the media reports triggered their own memories of abuse.

“[We work with] people who may interact directly with the Royal Commission but also people who may simply hear news coming out of the Royal Commission and find that their own trauma histories are exacerbated by hearing that situation,” Jackie Burke, the Clinical Director of R&DVSA, told ASR.

Hearing the testimonies of those abused can also be disturbing for those working to bring perpetrators to justice. The NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General’s 2010 [Report of the Child Pornography Working Party](#) found police officers, detectives and investigators working to convict those who sexually abuse children can also experience trauma. The report recommended police limit their exposure to child pornography images while investigating those accused of abuse, and that as a matter of health and safety anyone else working on the cases, such as court staff, also have limited exposure to confronting material.

Similarly, the Royal Commission itself has ensured from the outset that the six Commissioners themselves, as well as investigators and court staff were rotated on a regular basis.

RIGHT FROM THE MOMENT the Royal Commission was established in 2013 by the Gillard government, it was acknowledged there would be a strong requirement for trauma

counselling, and not just for abuse victims.

“The Australian Government understands the importance of ensuring that survivors of child sexual abuse and affected family members are supported to participate in the Royal Commission,” the Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin, who had carriage of setting up the Royal Commission, said at the time. “It is vital there is support available to them before, during and after their engagement with the Commission.”

The Australian government was determined to learn from the mistakes of a government-led Commission in Ireland. The Ryan Commission sat from 2000 until its final report in May 2009, hearing institutional child sexual abuse allegations stemming from 1936 until the present day. While it eventually offered a national counselling service to victims, a number of child protection services such as Barnados and the Rape Crisis Network Ireland were concerned that not nearly enough had been done to protect the mental health of the victims. One survivor of clerical sexual abuse, Michael O’Brien, told Irish TV program *Questions and Answers* in 2009 that he was so traumatized by his five days in the witness box at the Ryan Commission that he attempted suicide.

Eight of those child protection services produced [Saving Childhood Ryan](#), a 2010 report that called on the Irish government to implement key policy changes that were promised in the final Ryan Report. The services’ report argued that lip-service to more counselling wasn’t good enough— it was imperative the Irish government fund the promised support services.

“The scars of their [child abuse victims]’ past will take a long time to heal and having to endure waiting lists to access [counselling] services is unacceptable,” Ellen O’Malley-Dunlop from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre said at the time.

In Australia, [counselling was made a priority from the outset](#). The \$45 million set aside for counselling services was for external services which tendered for and won contracts; in addition the Royal Commission hired counsellors to work with its



Michael O’Brien was so traumatized by giving evidence at the Ryan Commission that he considered suicide.

own staff and those testifying, who are offered the choice of counselling before, during and after their testimonies. All who make a submission speak to an investigator about whether they should testify in a private or public hearing.

So far, the Commission has heard over 3000 private submissions, many in rural and remote areas. In each hearing, the Commissioner and victim are joined by a legal worker and a support member of the victim’s choosing. If the Royal Commission staff remains concerned about their mental health, they refer them to one of the external support services.

Jason received such support after testifying in private, and told ASR his use of Twitter has also seen him receive additional help. He regularly tweets to the Commission (@CARoyalCommission), and says Commission staff and others have responded to him via social media to check that he is OK.

“I’ve just recently met a woman through Twitter who’s from CLAN [the Care Leavers Australia Network, a support network for Australians who grew up in orphanages, foster homes and other care], and she’s been in touch with me about all the support that they can offer,” he says.

Commission staff strongly encourage those like Jason to come forward and testify in private, or

The counsellors

The [Royal Commission refers victims](#), their family and friends, and members of the public to these support agencies. The Commission refers people to the 24-hour national hotline telephone counselling service [1800 RESPECT](#) which was established in 2010 as part of [The National Plan To Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children](#).

It also uses the following specialist counselling facilities, including face-to-face services.

[Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia](#) received \$2.9 million in federal government funding after an open tender process, in which 41 organizations around Australia won resources to provide for those affected by the Royal Commission.

It used the funds for its hotline, 1800 211 028, which is staffed by trained counsellors from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. AEST every day. Those working on the hotline must have a minimum three years' work experience in trauma counselling plus tertiary qualifications.

R&DVSA switches its hotline to 1800 RESPECT between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. AEST. Although based

in NSW, the R&DVSA hotline is available to anyone, nationwide.

In NSW, the tender for face-to-face counselling was won and shared by three separate organizations: R&DVSA, [Relationships Australia](#) and [Interrelate](#).

There are also specialized services for children with a disability, those from non-English speaking backgrounds, people of different religious faiths as well as Aboriginal crisis centres, including for those who were members of the Stolen Generation.

[Medibank Health Solutions](#) won the tender to work with Commission staff.

Who counsels the counsellors?

The in-house counsellors employed by the Royal Commission undergo the same mental health checks as their colleagues, and are rotated regularly. R&DVSA counsellors are restricted in the number of hours per day they can take calls, and are also required to take regular mental health checks.

use a pseudonym if attending a public hearing to minimize the chance of their experience triggering more trauma. There is a concern that being recognized, seeing their stories in the media or having strangers bring up their testimonies in the future can further exacerbate their suffering.

Those like Guy Lamond who testify at the public hearings using their full names are also well supported. The Commission provides a counsellor to liaise with them before their testimony, and follow up after their claims go public.

Lamond says he had professional help before testifying at the Commission and, he told ASR, a month after his testimony he was still receiving follow-up phone calls from Commission staff.

“I have never been involved in something more amazing than the support we got,” he said.

LEARNING FROM SOME OF THE FAILURES of the Irish Royal Commission, every two months all staff working on the Royal Commission undergo compulsory checks, either on the phone or in person. Even back-office staff, such as those working on payroll, are required to take part in case they have been traumatized by media reports or the Commission's findings. Trained counsellors check in with them, and they can be referred to a GP or any of the specialized services.

Those who work one-on-one with the victims in the public and private hearings are monitored

more closely. The six Commissioners are rotated regularly, and cannot attend private hearings for more than two weeks at a time. A spokesperson for the Royal Commission told ASR the nature of what is divulged in a private hearing is often far more graphic and upsetting than what the public hears, in part because it is the first time the abused is reliving their trauma.

The Royal Commission hearings have also been deeply distressing for some members of the public. Anyone can attend a public hearing, and the hearings are also streamed on the Commission's website; they are flagged with a warning that the content can be upsetting.

A toolkit for media reporting on the Commission's findings provides guidelines for sensitive reporting of the issue, particularly on social media, and recommends that contact details of support services such as Lifeline be included in all media reports. The Commission's website reminds journalists that victims' trauma can be exacerbated by seeing their abuse stories played out in the media, and to be mindful of the upsetting nature of the hearings and the impact that can have on the public.

Seasoned Channel 9 reporter Damian Ryan has covered war zones, and told ASR that covering the Knox Grammar inquiry was extremely disturbing; even before the victims were identified, he said, you could pick them out due to their distressed state.

Ryan says it was only natural as a human being to be upset by some of the hearings but that "what was more distressing was that nothing was done about it [for so long]".

Traditionally journalism has had a macho culture of denying that reporters might themselves be affected by covering traumatic events but the Commission, offers support for journalists should they require it.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION IS EXPECTED to conclude its hearings by December 2017. It is [currently seeking submissions for a national redress](#), expected to be similar to the recommendations in Ireland's final Ryan Report, and include measures designed to alleviate the suffering of those abused.



Nine News reporter Damian Ryan found the Commission hearings distressing.

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The redress was expected to include a request for formal apologies from the institutions involved, ongoing counselling and support for victims and a compensation scheme. However, the proposed \$4.3 billion single compensation scheme for victims was dealt a blow in late March, when the Abbott government failed to send a representative to the public hearing and rejected the compensation proposal as "too complex, time consuming and costly". The Royal Commission has described this response as "disappointing". ❖

