

# The corporate approach to domestic violence: speak no evil

By DAVID ELIAS

**S**HHH! This is the subject we don't talk about at work. Today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, but it will go unnoticed in most businesses. Employers insist that family violence has nothing to do with them because people who bash their partners usually do so at home. So it is a purely domestic issue.

National Australia Bank, which employs more than 15,000 women, told *The Age* that last year only 15 employees sought the help of counsellors through the employee assistance program because their partners bashed them.

It is a low figure that can only be put down to the unwillingness of victims to come forward for fear of further consequences at home or work.

The statistics show that as many as one in five women at some stage in life falls victim to what is variously described as family violence or intimate partner violence.

The cost to employers is growing year by year, and stands at nearly \$500 million in lost production and nearly as much again in lost economic efficiency, according to policy researchers Access Economics.

According to most experts, family violence follows the victim and the perpetrators into the workplace, affecting their efficiency and others around them. And when their work involves machinery and vehicles, it can be dangerous to all.

Women, who make up most of the victims, are sometimes late for work or absent, and they often work at less than opti-

mum efficiency. The perpetrators too can be troubled by their actions, and many have to take time off to attend court.

And then there are the obsessives who continue to stalk and harass their partners and former partners on company time, on company phones and in company vehicles.

Victoria Police is receiving more than 28,000 reports of family violence a year. Access Economics researchers have taken figures from police across Australia and concluded that some 408,100 people were victims of family violence in the 2002-03 financial year, and a further 263,800 children were living with these victims. Some 181,200 children witnessed acts of violence, according to the research.

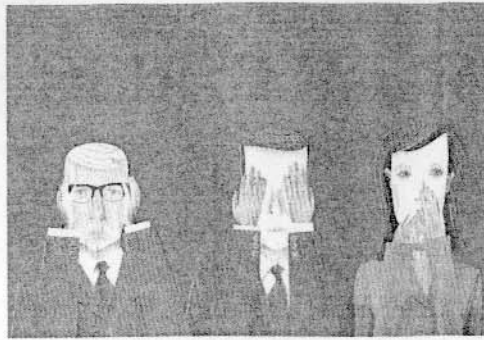
The Access study, commissioned by the Federal Government's Office for the Status of Women, found that the workplace is bearing a large share of the estimated \$8 billion family violence costs each year.

It estimates that production-related costs amount to \$484 million, to which it adds another \$410 million for loss of economic efficiency, including \$90 million in lost taxes.

It is not as much as the human cost — \$3.5 billion for pain, suffering and premature death, a \$388 million health bill and \$220 million spent helping children who witness violent acts — but its impact on the workplace is considerable.

Yet most employers fail to understand it, or they ignore it. Some refuse to discuss it.

Qantas said confidential counselling was available to staff through the employee assistance program but when we asked how it trained



managers and supervisors to recognise potentially dangerous symptoms, its spokeswoman said Qantas had no further information.

The state's peak employer organisation, the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry, did not come up with a response. Coles Myer, another big employer of women, also stayed silent.

Westpac and NAB were willing to discuss how they raised awareness through various in-house strategies.

VicHealth, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, has published a booklet showing that intimate partner violence heads the list of factors contributing to "the disease burden" in women aged 15-44 years.

Victims could not find a stronger male champion than VicHealth chief executive Rob Moodie, but even he had to admit that in his office, which is full of women, he had never managed to detect a case that needed expert attention.

Rhonda Cumberland, the

director of the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service, says there are few organisations that do any more than provide outside counselling, which she describes as no fix at all.

"There is nothing in best practice in the workplace to show that corporate Australia has got a handle on this issue. There is an ideological obsession that it is not their business. It is a private matter and that general entitlements and a welfare program is all that is required.

"We have yet to see any best practice response where people are required to become engaged in the criminality of this behaviour. I bet you don't hear any company talking about their understanding of the legal process or police reporting that should be a critical part of the response."

Ms Cumberland, who is a member of the Victorian Community Council against Violence, says that companies, big and small, are equally resistant to programs that could make a difference.

Jo Cavanagh, head of Southern Family Life, an organisation that works with business and industry in Melbourne's southern suburbs, confirmed that barely a handful of companies had signed up for a partnership program that would introduce strategies into the workplace.

She says she was heartened when 70 employer representatives turned up to a seminar designed to heighten awareness and provide them with these strategies.

"We are talking about the intersection of work and family. This is one of the family issues that comes to work and has an impact on the workplace just as stress at work has an impact on the family."

She says she looks forward to the day when companies have programs as part of their good corporate citizenry.

However, she says it is unlikely to happen until the present generation of veteran and baby boomer managers had departed the scene and been replaced by more responsive generation Xers.

She says the drive for change has to come from the top, and too often progress comes to a dead end when there is change at the top.

When the Victorian Community Council Against Violence put out its paper *Family Violence IS a Workplace Issue* last October, it held up a Melbourne transport company as an example of what could be achieved through a partnership program with Southern Family Life. It encouraged men to come forward with issues that were troubling them and causing them to bash their partners.

Ms Cavanagh said it worked well because the chief executive

was behind it but when he retired his replacement had no such interest and the arrangement collapsed.

Dr Moodie at VicHealth agreed that change could only come from the top. "Chief executives have to believe that it is an issue and it is an issue for their workplace."

He says they have to keep measuring it in both the human and economic costs of absenteeism, poor work performance and staff turnover.

Ruth Oakden's work as chaplain of the Toll Holdings transport and logistics group is an example of enlightened leadership. She is there not because Toll's tough-talking managing director Paul Little has a soft heart but a realistic grasp of the sound economics of it all.

Ms Oakden's car is her office. Four days a week she drives between transport depots talking to the workers from male truck drivers and forklift drivers of both sexes to office staff and their managers.

She says she is forever seeking to gain their confidence, to talk to them about the footy and whatever else is going on in their lives, and listen to their problems.

What they tell her all too often puts flesh and bone on the statistics. Many women turn up to work with make-up covering bruises and black eyes. For some the workplace is a refuge from regular bashings at home. Others cannot escape and are stalked and harassed at work by partners.

But she says increasing numbers of men are beginning to talk about their problems. "They never come to me and say 'I am knocking the wife around, what should I do about

it'. They come to me because they have been stressed at work, because there has been an incident at work, because their kids are not talking to them, because there has been a series of late mornings and their bosses have dobbed them in.

"It then comes out as a domestic violence, anger management issue. They come out with classic lines like 'only when she needs it', 'only when she pushes me to do it', 'no more than necessary' and 'no more than anybody else does'.

"Sometimes you are dealing with a different set of standards, a different level of acceptability. When you talk to some of the women, they think it's their fault. They say: 'I should not have talked to him like that when he was pissed, or 'I should not have mentioned that when he was cross'."

Ms Oakden says that once they start talking, they have taken the first step towards getting help that can save time and money all round.

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ROB MOODIE, VicHealth CEO

The Body Shop runs a domestic violence awareness program in its shops and on its internet site that attempts to break the silence and provide basic guidance for women who might need help.

Social affairs manager Eloise Bishop says that this requires staff to undertake training that can make some think seriously about their own circumstances and seek help for themselves.

But she adds there is also a downside to being so upfront because some customers find it too confronting and refuse to come into their stores.

The party plan lingerie business Intimo uses its sales force to raise awareness at its parties. Intimo is particularly active this month, marking the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women by donating 50% to domestic violence programs from every white bra it sells.

Australia Post is another stand-out example with a mix of programs for male and female employees. Corporate human resources consultant Elizabeth Slee claims its 35,000 workforce has the most accurate cross-representation of Australian society of any workforce. The country's social issues are mirrored in its staff.

"We are trying to focus on preventing an event occurring which is quite difficult but hopefully more cost-effective," she said.

Line managers are taught how to look for symptoms such as depression, anxiety and physical injury, and to point people towards help.

Australia Post has a dedicated phone number to Mensline Australia so male employees can seek help. The number is included in a wallet card issued to male employees and on posters in men's rooms.

Ms Slee says the post office started to appreciate the need to get into the issue about a year ago. Asked why it had taken so long to get involved, she said society itself was only just beginning to recognise it as an issue. "It has taken a long time for our culture to come to terms with that."