

## **ROAD TRAUMA COUNSELLING SERVICE**

Claire Parker, Julie Parsons, Terri-Anne Pettet,  
RoadWise, Western Australian Local Government Association.

### **ABSTRACT**

Whilst much attention is focused on primary and secondary prevention strategies in road safety, little consideration is given to tertiary intervention.

We sprout the road toll, the number of deaths and injuries, we estimate the financial burden of road trauma and the cost to the community, we provide equipment to emergency services and hospitals to treat the injured – but what about those that are ‘left behind’? The people who are traumatised as a result of witnessing a road crash – how do they cope in the aftermath?

This paper details the planning, consultative process, establishment, operation, promotion and evaluation of a dedicated road trauma counselling service. This free and confidential telephone counselling service has been initiated to specifically provide a service for those suffering emotional, psychological trauma as a result of road crashes.

The service is a result of an expressed need by community members and identified as a gap in service provision following consultation and research.

Emergency personnel are now able to supply witness, and/or family or friends affected by road crashes, with the 131114 telephone number to access assistance and advice in coping with impact on them.

Lifeline, in partnership with RoadWise, has a team of specially trained operators that provide this service state-wide 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In operation for 6 months, early evaluation results are positive (in terms of better managing road trauma) with expected demand being exceeded and consideration being given to expanding the number of lines dedicated to road trauma counselling service.

### **BACKGROUND**

In 1998 a resident of the Shire of Serpentine-Jarrahdale was first at the scene of a car crash which involved multiple fatalities. This individual contacted Police and Emergency Services and waited at the scene for their arrival. He stayed on site for the duration of the event, providing assistance and statements to Police regarding the crash. Upon being thanked by the Police he left the scene and returned to his home.

Following the event, he began to experience symptoms of post traumatic stress resulting in him being unable to leave his home and refusing to let members of his family drive anywhere. The family made unsuccessful attempts to access some service which could provide support.

At this time they also contacted the Shire of Serpentine-Jarrahdale RoadWise Committee for advice. A committee representative referred the request to RoadWise who in turn, could not locate any direct service to deal with the matter, though alternatively referring the family to the Police Chaplain who was thankfully able to assist this individual.

This incident became the catalyst for further investigation at a state level to find out what services if any were available to witnesses as well as people directly or indirectly involved with road crash trauma.

### **RESEARCH and DEVELOPMENT**

To further investigate RoadWise convened a meeting of stakeholders and conducted community consultations to ascertain the need for a specialised service.

The felt need was reinforced and expressed by key stakeholders at an initial meeting to determine and review existing services, if any were able to provide support to witnesses of road crashes. And to identify if there was a need for the development of such a service

A review of the following services included:

- Chaplains from Emergency Services
- Support groups
- Professional health services
- Health Department of WA

- State Coroners Court
- Police services, and other
- Emergency services

At this initial meeting the following points were revealed and acknowledged:

- Many instances, where the need for support was identified, appeared to be addressed in an ad hoc manner through the kindness of people such as emergency service chaplain or individual officers;
- A recognised need for a specific service for the general community that could provide initial support, that being, the opportunity to talk through the issues with someone who was trained in post traumatic stress and grief counselling;
- The service needed to be confidential, easy to access and free of charge;
- The service could provide referral at a local level to further professional help if required.

The stakeholders present at this meeting resolved to form a steering committee to research and develop such a service, with the following organisations nominating representatives to be involved in the steering committee:

- Roadwise
- APART (Australian Parents Against Road Trauma)
- Shire of Serpentine-Jarahdale
- Coroner's Court of WA
- Health Department of WA
- Police Road Section
- Police Major Crash Section
- Insurance Commission of WA
- Injury Control Council of WA
- Cannington Police District Office

The steering committee formulated an action plan, based on three objectives, in order to further investigate the issues and to ascertain possible service providers that could meet the requirements identified.

- More research needed to be undertaken to determine the scope of the problem, and likely professional groups that would be able to deliver road trauma counselling
- It was necessary to identify existing agencies and service providers
- A card be developed with a telephone counselling service number on it be distributed at a crash scene to witnesses

Considerable time and effort was put in to determine what sort of service was required and which, if any, existing agency could provide the service required. A survey of existing services including health Direct, Crisis Care, Salvo Care Line, Kids Help Line, Lifeline and the road trauma support team in North West Tasmania was conducted.

#### **IMPLEMENTATION** – *the service, the card and referral*

Following a review of existing services, Lifeline was identified as the best placed and appropriate organisation to deliver a service providing counselling specifically for witnesses of road crashes.

Lifeline, the service provider is a registered Counselling Service. They are also nationally recognised as a successful and professional organisation providing a much needed and highly regarded service. All counsellors are fully trained by qualified psychologists.

In consultation with the steering committee the following service objective was identified:

To be accessible to people in the community who were suffering psychological trauma associated with road crashes and who were unsupported. The key requirement of the service was that it be available throughout the state for the cost of a local call and available for 24 hours a day seven days a week.

Lifeline undertook to train their counsellors in dealing with road trauma and set up a statewide data-base of counselling providers who would be willing to offer a first consultation either free of charge or for a nominal fee.

To deal with the issues associated with road trauma, Lifeline in conjunction with the Directorate of Mental Health at Fremantle Hospital developed a specific module for training purposes. Endorsed by Dr David Castle, Director, this component covers post traumatic stress and grief counselling.

The service provides someone who will listen and provide confidential support for the client's feelings relating to the event. The service does not analyse, provide answers/comment or make judgements on any situations.

In addition however, a data-base of qualified psychologists and other counselling service throughout the state is being developed so that individual clients requiring more intensive support on a face to face basis can be achieved via referral from lifeline telephone counsellors. Many of these will provide discounted or even free, first consultations.

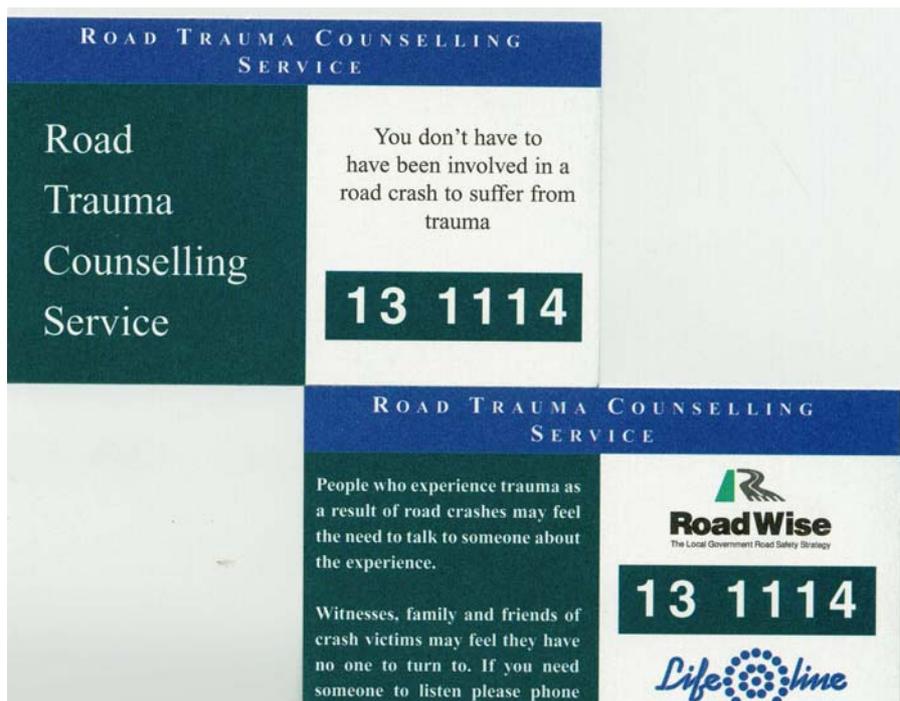
This confidential telephone counselling service is available to anyone that requires it throughout the state for the cost of a local call and is promoted primarily via the dissemination of business size cards (see below).

This card is handed to witnesses at the scene of a crash by emergency service personnel (Fire and Rescue, St Johns, State Emergency Services and Police), where appropriate.

Through consultation with stakeholders and the steering committee, in consideration of the extensive role of emergency services officers at the scene of a crash, it was determined that these officers do receive requests from those directly involved, witnesses and after the event from family and friends asking for more information and assistance.

To this end, it is anticipated that the road trauma counselling service card will assist them in their role by being able to provide assistance in an efficient and effective manner and without the need for officers to become personally involved.

Additionally the card is distributed via doctors surgeries, religious organisations, local governments, hospitals, RoadWise committees, funeral services and youth and community centres throughout the state.



## PROMOTION AND DISTRIBUTION

In conjunction with a media and public relations specialist from the Western Australian Local Government Association, the steering committee have developed and implemented a comprehensive communication strategy and promotional plan.

Promoting the service to key agencies via RoadWise networks was achieved through the development and distribution of information packs relating to each key agencies involved as determined by their management along with personal presentations by RoadWise staff.

Road Trauma Counselling Service packs were produced and distributed throughout the state to RoadWise Officers and Committees, and other road safety and emergency service agencies to promote the project and assist each agency in raising awareness within the community of the establishment of the telephone counselling service. These information packs contain information sheets, poster, frequently asked questions sheet and order form for cards, along with a powerpoint presentation, background notes, list of counsellors, evaluation and feedback forms.

The Road Trauma Counselling Service was officially launched on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 2001, at the start of the annual White Ribbons for Christmas Road Safety Campaign. A moving ceremony, speeches by a number of prominent and respected community leaders and attended by a large crowd of dignitaries and stakeholders generating media attention and enabling much publicity for the establishment of this service.

Ongoing follow up promotional activities arranged and coordinated by RoadWise Officers, has ensured promotion of the service in each of the nine regions of Western Australia.

## **EVALUATION**

Through the development and establishment of the Road Trauma Counselling Service a number of measures have been included to continuous monitoring and evaluation purposes. Included in the Road Trauma Counselling Kit are an order form for cards along with a card distribution sheet, also a feedback form to allow for agency, stakeholder, individual officers and community members to provide comments and suggestion for improvement.

In addition, Lifeline log all calls and whilst maintaining client confidentiality collect and record data such as approximate age, gender, individual's support systems, number of times individual has used the service, referrals, date of the incident, type of involvement in the incident and how the client became aware of the service. This data will provide valuable information in assessing the impact of road crashes on witnesses.

Since the Road Trauma Counselling Service began operating in December 2001 the following data has been collected to gauge the reach and use of the service:

- 9215 cards have been ordered by and distributed to 90 key agencies and emergency service units in Western Australia.
- An average of five calls per month are received by through the Lifeline 13 1114 number accessing counselling directly linked to road trauma.
- Two referrals of clients for intensive face to face counselling have been made in the first six months of implementation.
- Positive and encouraging anecdotal reports and feedback, particularly use and satisfaction of the cards by emergency service personnel in their line of duty.

In concluding, it would be optimistic to believe that this service would become redundant in the near future, however with the enormous efforts being made by many sectors to reduce the number of severity of road crashes in Western Australia through primary and secondary prevention strategies, such as education, encouragement, engineering and enforcement activities in the long term what we hope to observe is just that – the need for such a service being obsolete. In the meantime however, the Road Trauma Counselling Service will provide those affected through road trauma with an affordable means of accessing support and enable emergency service officers to assist witnesses in dealing with impact of road trauma.