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Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month: GPs Receive Training to Spot Hidden Signs of Domestic Abuse

May marks the start of Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Month, which raises awareness about domestic and family violence (DFV) and reinforces the message that violence won't be tolerated. It's a time to encourage individuals and communities to speak out against violence, empower people to work together for prevention, and highlight available support services.

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, is taking this opportunity to talk about the widespread health impacts of DFV and to remind those experiencing violence, as well as their friends, family and colleagues, that their general practitioner (GP) can be a safe place to seek help.

Research from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reveals that 1 in 6 women and 1 in 18 men have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research report that for the Nepean Blue Mountains region, which includes the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas, there were 1,899 reported domestic violence related assaults last calendar year.

While these figures are alarming, they are likely to be even higher due to the rate of unreported abuse. The 2021-22 Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey revealed 8 in 10 women and 7 in 10 men who experienced violence from a current or previous partner did not contact police.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said that the effects and impacts of DFV can manifest in different ways.

"Research shows that intimate partner violence was in the top five risk factors for illness in women aged 15-54. It might not always be that someone presents with obvious signs of abuse like bruises or broken bones, but they may have conditions or symptoms, like depression, anxiety or substance abuse that are caused or exasperated by what they are experiencing in their relationship."

Ms Reay stated estimates indicate that every week, a GP sees up to five women who have been abused by their partners, and one in five will disclose that they are actively experiencing DFV.

"The rate of GPs that are trained to recognise the more subtle signs and symptoms, and how to respond appropriately, is gradually increasing thanks to the Care and Connect Program, funded by the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. This training provides GPs and other primary healthcare professionals with the knowledge and resources to better identify and support victim-survivors which we hope will increase not only that disclosure rate but also improve the GP's ability to identify a victim-survivor and effectively navigate that conversation," she said.

Ms Reay explained the program provides training for healthcare professionals, including GPs, practice nurses, practice staff and others, and connects them with Care and Connect Linkers, provided by Relationships Australia NSW.

"Linkers are specially trained support workers who can assist with everything from making a safety plan, to providing support around seeking apprehended violence orders, housing, counselling, financial support, and more. The Linkers will connect the person seeking support with the most



appropriate specialist DFV service. They also provide referrals to behaviour change programs for individuals who use violence,” she added.

Care and Connect Linkers work out of several local general practices in the region, making it easier for victim-survivors to access these services.

“We want people to know that their GP can be a safe first point of contact if they are facing any of these issues. By providing healthcare professionals with the tools and training they need, we can create a stronger, more informed health system. This will provide those affected by violence with the confidence and sense of safety they need, to seek and access help and to hopefully heal and rebuild their lives,” said Ms Reay.

Ms Reay added that it’s also common for those experiencing DFV to reach out to a friend or family member, or it may be the case that these people recognise the signs but don’t know how to ask their loved one if they want to talk or need help.

“We know in some cases people who are experiencing DFV will commonly seek support from someone close to them – be it a friend or family member. Often, people don’t know how to respond, what to say, or where to get help. An important part of ending DFV is educating ourselves and knowing how to support someone who may reach out for help,” she said.

In Australia, **1800RESPECT** is a nationally recognised service offering counselling, information, and support for those affected by domestic, family and sexual violence. The service operates 24/7 and includes phone and online counselling and has recently expanded to provide a discreet text messaging option. **1800RESPECT** can also take calls from concerned family and friends and can provide them with advice on how to help people they care about who are being impacted.

“There are multiple state and national services that are available 24/7 and operate regardless of public holidays. Another important service to be aware of is Link2Home on **1800 152 152**. For those who may find themselves in need of emergency accommodation due to domestic violence, this service provides information, assessment and/or referral to specialist housing services, including services just for women and children.” said Ms Reay.

If you need urgent crisis support or are in immediate danger, it’s important to always make the police your first point of call on 000.

Other organisations that can offer support include:

- [**1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732**](#)
available 24/7 to support people with confidential information, counselling and support.
- [**NSW Domestic Violence Line – 1800 656 463**](#)
available 24/7 providing counselling and referrals.
- [**LINK2HOME \(Statewide 24/7\) – 1800 152 152**](#)
Link2home is the NSW statewide homelessness information and referral telephone service.
- [**Full Stop Australia | – 1800 385 578**](#)
available 24/7 via telephone or online chat.
- [**Child Protection Helpline \(Statewide 24/7\) – 132 111**](#)
Reporting service if you think a child of young person is at risk of harm from abuse or neglect.
- [**Sexual Assault Counselling Australia \(National 24/7\) – 1800 211 028**](#)
For adult survivors of childhood institutional sexual abuse. Supporting anyone accessing the Redress Scheme and alternative compensation.
- [**Kids helpline \(National 24/7\) – 1800 551 800**](#)
Free confidential online and phone counselling service for young people aged 5 - 25.



- **[Mensline \(National 24/7\) – 1300 789 978](#)**
Telephone and online counselling service for men.
- **[Mental Health Help website](#)**
Services for people living in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow or Penrith.

“I encourage community members who are experiencing DFV to reach out to your GP. You don’t have to experience or navigate this difficult journey alone. Your GP can link you with the right supports to help you to move forward,” said Ms Reay.

To learn more about the Care and Connect Program visit www.nbmphn.com.au/CareandConnect

