

The fox now guards the hen house

What a welcome surprise. In June this year the NSW government announced a pilot programme for male victims of domestic violence. Finally politicians were acknowledging that women aren't the only victims of family violence. A third of victims are male, said Pru Goward as she promised \$13 million over four years for the pilot.

That's chickenfeed compared to the hundreds of millions that Malcolm Turnbull boasts are being spent on domestic violence across the country, all promoting an ideologically-driven agenda which pretends the problem is all about men and ignores 40 years of international research showing most family violence is two-way, involving women as well as men.

What a blow to discover last week that the government has awarded the contract for this vital new service to Men's Referral Service, an organization driven by feminist ideology and long known for shunning male victims. In the past MRS was on the record for refusing to acknowledge the existence of male victims. More recently the organisation's position shifted to arguing male victims don't experience abuse in the same way as women and hence don't deserve support.

MRS has only ever worked with male perpetrators and is notorious for "red flagging" men who claim to be victims, attempting to prove they are in fact perpetrators.

What is really astonishing is that the NSW government boasts that this was the reason MRS was chosen for the job. In response to my questions the Attorney General's department proudly proclaimed MRS was selected because of the organization's expertise in "how to identify a genuine victim."

"Victims will be referred to local support services in NSW while aggressors will be encouraged to take part in Men's Behaviour Change programmes."

There are currently no local services for male victims but the government claims to be sleuthing out "holistic support" as "referral points" in 46 locations – heaven knows from where, given that almost all DV services currently refuse to help men.

But now the fox is to be in charge of the hen house. Men victims, who are notoriously reluctant to seek help, are to be put through a dubious screening process run by an organization with a long history of decrying their very existence.

The AG's department claims the decision to use MRS is based on an evidence-based approach successfully trialled in the UK by Respect, a domestic violence organization. Yet there has been huge controversy in Britain over the Respect approach which many see as placing unnecessary barriers in the way of men who need help. Louise Dixon, a psychology professor formerly at the University of Birmingham but now in New Zealand, sums up the criticism of Respect's work: "the ethos that informs their practice....is unsupported by the

evidence, and is ideologically-based." Many alternate domestic violence programmes have been established, particularly in Scotland, which are male-friendly and genuinely dedicated to helping victims in need.

Imagine the outcry if domestic violence services for women assumed most alleged victims were in fact perpetrators. The whole domestic violence movement is based on the premise that "we believe women" yet our first government-funded programme for male victims is to operate on the assumption that we shouldn't believe men.

It's hardly surprising that men working with victims around the country are up in arms. Yet this move by the NSW government is entirely in keeping with national domestic violence policy.

At a suicide prevention seminar last year one of the speakers was manager of a male telephone helpline. He spoke about men who ring up saying they are suicidal as a result of being abused, physically and emotionally by their partners.

To the astonishment of the audience, the manager then revealed that when they receive a call from such a male victim they contact the police who track down the man's personal details by tracing the call. Assuming the male may be a perpetrator the police then contact the man's partner to check out her side of the story.

Many in the audience were incredulous at this breach of confidentiality and failure of the duty of care to the potentially suicidal client. During questioning the manager revealed government policy determined his organization would lose government funding if they didn't assume all male victims were most likely perpetrators.

He's right. The official document spelling out Victorian government policy on DV (*Family Violence – Risk Assessment and Risk Management Framework*) assumes men who present as victims of violence will often falsely blame their partners for their own aggression and advises such men *plus* their partners must be referred for comprehensive assessment.

So it is official government policy – not just in Victoria but under the national DV framework - to breach a male victim's privacy, contact the perpetrator of the violence and believe her side of the story at the expense of his. This could never happen in reverse, with our government hunting down the partners of female victims and choosing only to believe their version of events. The fact that our authorities are getting away with treating men this way shows the grip the anti-male DV lobby group has over this country.

I wrote recently (<http://bit.ly/29CV5zD>) about a Swedish politician, Eva Solberg, who denounced her government's anti-male strategy for combating domestic violence as a "tired gendered analysis" which has comprehensively failed – her country has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the EU. She quoted the 1700 peer-reviewed papers showing most children growing up in violent homes witness violence from both their parents. "To

know this and then continue to ignore the damage done to the children who are today subjected to violence is a huge social betrayal,” said Solberg.

Since then I have heard from people across the country reporting men being abused by their partners, people who grew up with violent mothers, professionals every day confronting violence by women as well as men – social workers, policemen, psychologists, lawyers. They all report they are too afraid to speak out about what they know. The result is our governments get away with denying the complexities of this important social issue and the huge social betrayal just rolls on.