



Complex Trauma WA Inc.

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ANNUAL REPORT

Aug 2018 – Feb 2020

Our vision

“A healthy community of thriving individuals”

Our Purpose

To reduce complex trauma through increasing awareness, collaboration and trauma-informed competencies in Western Australia.

Our Values in Action

Generosity. We live empathy and compassion; honour difference; and have a whole-community perspective.

Courage. We value curiosity; seek to understand; and persevere for what's right.

Collaboration. We find new ways of working, to cooperatively share resources and knowledge; and prioritise co-investment and interdependence.

Integrity. We have high standards for honesty, being trustworthy, safety and boundaries.

Accountability. We set a high premium on transparency; self-awareness; and courageous conversations.

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT

I am pleased to present the first Annual Report for Complex Trauma WA Inc. (COTWA), covering the first 18 months of operation.

Complex trauma is estimated to affect 1 in 4 Australian adults, and is often referred to as 'relational trauma' or 'betrayal trauma'. It differs from single-incident trauma (such as a motor vehicle accident or natural disaster) in that it is interpersonal, ongoing and/or repeated, and often premeditated and extreme. It involves being or feeling trapped; and usually occurs during developmentally sensitive periods of neurological maturation - thereby altering the structural development of neural networks and the biochemistry of neuroendocrine systems. The long-term consequences of complex trauma include a strong and often co-occurring association with numerous physical health and mental health problems, as well as economic, social, and behavioural problems throughout the entire lifespan - these are not usually thought of as related to childhood abuse or neglect; and people do not 'grow out of it'. Links between complex trauma and heart disease, cancer, chronic pain, emphysema, diabetes, chronic lung disease, sexual health problems, sexually transmitted infections, depression, eating disorders, major dental problems, self-mutilation, learning disorders, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, teenage pregnancies, homelessness, suicide, and more are now well-established; and the cost to society is enormous.

At its inaugural meeting in August 2015, members of the Perth Complex Trauma Mental Health Professionals Network (MHPN) identified the need for a trauma-informed organisation that helped to improve service delivery for people with a history of complex trauma in Western Australia (WA). In addition to quarterly evening seminars, the network started to offer one paid professional development event per year with recognised complex-trauma experts to raise additional funding to support the network in meeting its objectives: To expand members' awareness of and clinical expertise in the specific treatment implications for people with a history of complex trauma; to build co-operative multi-disciplinary networks in both the public and private sector; and to develop a supportive collegial network, where members can also raise the vicarious implications of working with complex trauma.

In January 2018, the network was advised that the Federally funded not-for-profit Mental Health Professionals Networks precluded continued management of the network's accrued funds. This sparked the formation of *Complex Trauma WA*, and COTWA was registered as an Incorporated Association on 26 August 2018.

As is common during the formation stages of start-up developments, during its first year of operation, COTWA's initial vision and purpose got refined and expanded to go beyond that of a professional membership organisation only. A Special General meeting in August 2019 accepted a revised constitution that better reflected COTWA's objectives, which now augmented rather than duplicated that of the Perth Complex Trauma MHPN's. It clarified the criteria for membership eligibility, to open up membership beyond that of mental-health service providers only; and made more explicit aspects of the operations and management of the organisation.

As such, *Complex Trauma WA* (COTWA) has now become a peak body for complex trauma in Western Australia; and we are a recognised health-promotions charity with Gift Recipient Status. Membership is open to WA-based health professionals who work with or who are interested to work with adults, children, families, or other groups of people who present with a lived experience of complex trauma; as well as to professionals from other disciplines (such as trauma-informed lawyers, GPs, medical specialists, dentists, and others); and members of the public who have a general interest in complex trauma and support the objects of the Association.

Since its inception, COTWA's board spent significant numbers of volunteer hours to lay healthy, sustainable foundations for the Association.

After starting off with only three passionate clinical psychologists in private practice, the board has now doubled in size (despite the reluctant resignation of two board members in 2019), and we are still slowly but surely moving towards ensuring a fully representative board based on our identified board matrix. While we will always aim to have majority clinical membership to ensure its focus remains complex-trauma specific, we were extremely fortunate to also pique the volunteering interests of Ms Fran (McCrystal) Carerro-Baños, previous Executive Director of Services (Metro) at Ngala; and Mr David Edwards, a senior strategy and innovation manager at Horizon Power and recognised leader in his field. Both of them brought a wealth of experience in organisational change and development and general business management, and are adding tremendous value to the board.

We identified the Association's strategic priorities as being:

1. Increased awareness of and sensitivity to complex trauma in the community;
2. Encouraging and supporting trauma-informed services;
3. Increasing trauma-specific treatment expertise; and
4. Building a sustainable organisation, which includes efficient and effective financial processes and risk-management strategies; responsible business policies; and diversifying streams of revenue.

In working on their priorities for the next two years, the board identified a number of initiatives to focus its attention on. These included:

- Increasing COTWA's visibility in WA communities and growing the trauma-informed membership of the organisation. Special attention is afforded to identifying opportunities that support general members' treatment expertise, in service of (where applicable) upgrading to clinical membership in recognition of their increasing trauma-specific treatment expertise.

COTWA membership is steadily growing, with almost 60 clinicians having applied for registration since June 2019. All have been invited to renew their membership for the 2020/2021 membership year. Our *Complex Trauma WA* Facebook page, which regularly posts complex-trauma related information that may be of interest to members of the public, has accumulated 167 followers and reaches between 44 and 925 (!) people per post ($\bar{x} = 90$).

A key focus area for COTWA is to facilitate regular, local, affordable, professional-development events to develop the clinical expertise of clinicians in WA. COTWA presented its inaugural professional development event in September 2019, when Dr Richard Chefetz - a psychiatrist in private practice in Washington DC; past president of the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation (ISSTD); and author of the internationally acclaimed publication, *Intensive Psychotherapy for Persistent Dissociative Process: The Fear of Feeling Real* - presented a two-day workshop on 'Working with Dissociative Processes in Clinical Practice: Engaging the Fear of Feeling Real'. Given that dissociative disorders are still often considered 'extremely rare' in some professional circles, the workshop was well attended with 64 registrations! Adjunct Professor George Burns - an internationally recognised clinical psychologist, teacher, and author - is presenting a two-day workshop to COTWA members on 'Hypnosis, Trauma, and Dissociation'; and Dr Andrew Harkin will present a workshop on working with the body in complex-trauma psychotherapy, with particular emphasis on recognising and addressing hypo-arousal in traumatised clients later this year.

- In 2019, we presented a webinar on 'Working with Attachment, Personality and Complex Trauma' to counsellors and telephone volunteers at QLife, which offers anonymous and free LGBTI peer support and referral for people in Australia wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships. If our COVID19 future allows, COTWA is committed to offer at least four complex-trauma professional-awareness events every year to various interest groups.

- In seeking mutually beneficial strategic partnerships with sister organisations who share our purpose, COTWA entered into service agreements and/or preliminary discussions with the Blue Knot Foundation, formerly 'Adults Surviving Childhood Trauma' and Australia's national centre of excellence for complex trauma; the Alcohol and Other Drug Consumer & Community Coalition (AODCCC); Angelhands, another not-for-profit organisation who supports people recovering from extreme trauma; and Skillsbank WA, a subsidiary of Leadership WA.
- The board appointed Sorticulture to develop a simple, user-friendly, one-stop complex-trauma website for the Association, referrers, and members of the public alike; and a comprehensive complex-trauma service directory for Western Australia. The website Home page opens up with access to three different portals, each designed with a specific user persona (or avatar) in mind. The **SURVIVOR portal** is designed for those with a lived experience of complex trauma. Our planning avatar was *"50-year-old Suzy, who had a long history of childhood emotional neglect and physical abuse. She had tried therapy in the past but never found a good 'fit' where she felt comfortable with the therapist or the clinic (mint green walls take her back to her childhood bedroom, and flat emotionless voices conjure up an unavoidable sense of fear). The last thing she needed was another list of names of people who claimed they could help her, without being able to get a 'felt sense' of what she was getting herself into beforehand - it was hard enough to just get out of the house some days, and every failed attempt at therapy cost her more money than she could afford, and just made her feel more like a complete failure."*

Content is therefore presented in short and simple bite-sized chunks, with further details accessible as an optional additional choice depending on her need and functional capacity at the time.

Survivors' fear of the unknown is addressed under the section 'What to expect from treatment', where pertinent matters such as safety, choice, pace, trauma processing, quality of life/life skills, and length of treatment are covered. Possible funding options for treatment are discussed, with helpful information as to how various options could apply to trauma-treatment. Specially chosen key web links are added to limit overwhelm and support informed decision-making.

The Survivor portal also offers a carefully selected list of curated resources, that are specifically relevant to those with a lived experience. In particular, Ask Izzy is "a mobile website that connects people who are in crisis with the services they need right now and nearby", including housing, food, clothes, food vouchers, domestic and family violence, money, legal, drugs and alcohol, life skills and education, finding work, public facilities (such as toilets), advocacy, and more. Other web links offer high-quality psycho-educational information about complex trauma in general; and priceless information re. coping with the symptoms of complex trauma.

Alternatively, the user can go straight to the online directory, and search for a trauma-trained service provider that meet their criteria. Consumer input for the design of the COTWA Directory was sourced through the Complex-PTSD community chat room on Reddit (a web-based platform with infinite chat rooms for every conceivable topic), to explore what information survivors would find helpful when searching for a treating practitioner. Feedback from people with a lived experience of complex trauma was matched with information in the 'Mapping to Practice' section of The Blue Knot Foundation's Practice Guideline for Treatment of Complex Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, and this informed the type of information included in the directory.

The **LOVED ONES portal** is designed to be useful for partners or friends or other family members. Our planning avatar was *"Kind-hearted 35-year-old 'Annabelle', whose husband had been triggered by a recent life event and was not coping at all. She was really at the end of her tether. Not only did she want to feel supported and understood with what she was dealing with, but she also had plenty of time to browse potential therapists as she found solace knowing there was help"*

for her husband out there. She also found it useful to know what the different treatment modalities entailed, as she felt she knew her husband well enough to know what he would be receptive to.”

The page content is presented in the format of an informal conversation, ostensibly “written by a non-professional who’s only experience with complex trauma is loving someone with a lived experience”. Frequently asked questions about complex trauma, as well as common concerns, frustrations, issues, and helpful hints are covered in a chatty informal style. A list of resources specific to the needs of loved ones are included, including access to support group information, how to talk to a loved on about complex trauma, etc.

The **PROFESSIONALS portal** was designed with recently graduated ‘Dr Terry’ as our design avatar: *“Dr Terry is keen to make a difference, but is working in a clinic where appointments were scheduled only 10 minutes apart. He only had about 3 minutes to search the OSDR and find a practitioner who was accessible for his traumatised patient who had severe anxiety and didn’t like trains, but was happy to travel by bus to his appointments; and who also needed to be bulked billed because he was struggling financially.”*

The page presents with no frills or unnecessary page navigation clicking - straight to business. A concertina link features resources of interest to health-care professionals who are new to complex trauma, including Blue Knot Foundation’s guidelines for service providers on how to screen for or talk about this when they suspect someone may have experienced trauma. It features a report prepared by Pegasus Economics about the economic impact of unresolved childhood trauma and abuse in adults in Australia (which is, extremely conservatively calculated, far in excess of \$7,500 per traumatised adult per annum!); as well as a copy of the Australian guidelines for the treatment of mental health trauma in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; an introduction to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study that convincingly links many common physical health conditions to a history of childhood abuse and neglect; and a weblink addressing current controversies in the field of trauma such as the False Memory Syndrome movement, and the nature and prevalence of Dissociative Identity Disorder.

The main focus of the Professional page, however, is access to the **COTWA Directory**.

In addition to the usual fare on most clinical service directories, the COTWA Directory also includes trauma-relevant search criteria such as whether someone had a therapy animal, or offered outdoor consultations. Further information on individually mapped pins in the COTWA Directory are displayed in ‘business card’ format, followed by a bullet-point summary of clinical services offered. A clinician’s registration status is immediately accessible from the Directory, clicking on the URL for their public profile on their Regulatory Body’s website. Clicking on the practice address opens up a tab in Google maps with the practice address pre-filled, to assist with directions and travel-time estimates to/from the practice address. Business hours and information re. a service’s relative accessibility to public transport services are offered, with an option to plan a user’s journey between travel destinations by clicking on the Transperth Plan Your Journey icon. Clinicians are also encouraged to add their fee schedule and policies, to enable informed choices. GPs can share suitable clinicians’ profile and contact information by print, or forward it during the consultation to patients by text or email. Once back at home, patients can click on the link, and get a sense of whether the clinician they have been referred to will likely be a good fit, or potentially display triggering qualities best avoided, by listening to a video or voice recording of their profile. Also, photos of the practice and treatment space further contributes to informed decision-making, with clinicians being encouraged to upload photos that convey the kind of orienting and safety-based information that traumatised clients often need to assess whether they’d be able to tolerate attending a particular practice.

- Additional long-term projects that have been identified by the board include exploring options for Primary Health Practitioners to screen for complex trauma; exploring options to better support rural clinicians and communities; exploring online certification tools for trauma-informed services; and exploring complex-trauma auditing options for organisations, in service of ever-increasing trauma-informed care to survivors.

I am pleased to report that Complex Trauma WA remains solvent and in a position to meet its targeted initiatives for the next financial year. A financial statement for the period August 2018 to February 2020 is attached for your perusal.

It has been a privilege – and a steep learning curve! – to serve on this Board, and I would like to thank my fellow board members (Ana Santos, Vivien Bainbridge, Diana Phillips, David Edwards, and Fran Carrero-Baños) for their dedicated time, patience, and passionate support of COTWA. They have all renominated for their positions on the Board for one more term, to help ensure that COTWA's vision gets off to a sustainable start. Last but very much not least, I would also like to recognise our administrative officer, Bronwen Griffiths, for keeping us organised and (mostly!) on time.



Sonia Smuts
Chairperson