

CORRECTED VERSION

LAW REFORM COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sexting

Melbourne — 27 August 2012

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Ms M. Hunt, Project Worker, webWise Cybersafety Initiative, and

Ms E. Mahoney, Program Manager, Women's Health Grampians.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — I am Jane Garrett, the deputy chair of the Law Reform Committee, and I am standing in for the Chair as Clem Newton-Brown has had to attend a funeral. We are an all-party committee, and today obviously we are conducting a public hearing as part of the sexting inquiry. For your information, any evidence that you give here today is protected by parliamentary privilege, as if it were said in Parliament, but anything you say outside this committee would not be subject to the same privilege.

If you could both state your full names, your professional addresses, the capacity in which you are attending, and, if you are representing an organisation, the positions that you hold.

Ms HUNT — I am Michelle Hunt from Women's Health Grampians. I am a project worker on the webWise Cybersafety Initiative.

Ms MAHONEY — Emma Mahoney, program manager of Women's Health Grampians.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Terrific. Thank you very much. Are you both speaking, or just Michelle? Thanks, Michelle. Just make a short 10 to 15-minute presentation based on the submission you have made, and we will ask questions as appropriate. Thank you for your time.

Ms HUNT — Thank you for the opportunity of having a chat with you today. In preparing and building on the submission we did, the first thing to highlight is that it is a complex issue, which is probably no surprise for you guys. It requires lots of exploration and discussion. I do not think any one area has the answer or has the solution. It is probably something that requires lots of different ideas and thoughts to solve and to have a solution to.

From our perspective, we would say information communication technology is entangled in young people's real lives. I will talk particularly about young people, new technology and sexting. There is no online and offline world for young people. It is all intimately entangled, as I recently heard it described. Their cultural and social lives exist as much online as they do offline. From our perspective, it is quite a public life, that online life. Young people potentially see it as quite private — that they are in their own social groups and communicating in that way — but it is actually much more visible to us as a larger community than it has ever been before. Sexting is about young people's sexual exploration — young people developing their sexual identity, developing first relationships, flirting, being attracted to their peer group and stuff like that. It has always existed and it has always been part of developmental stages, but it is now occurring in a digital space in the sexting world.

In both online and offline we see aspects of how a larger social culture plays out in the digital world, and that includes the negative aspects of our culture. When young people are learning and developing their sexuality, if they are not having conversations with adults, parents, teachers or significant people, they are looking outside. They are looking at social media, they are looking at media: what are the messages, where are they getting that idea about what sexuality means? In that media space and social media space we have lots of gender stereotyping. There are some really sexualised ideas about women and women's sexuality and some really masculine and competitive masculine ideas about what it means to be male and attractive, and there is not much diversity in how that is portrayed.

Often I think the term 'sexualisation of culture' is bandied around. I think discussion about sexuality with young people is really important, and it is natural and it should be occurring, but the sexuality, the sexualisation and the negativity to that is that that discussion is not about diversity, it is not about other than heterosexual and it is not about other than some really strong ideas about women as sexually available to men and available to pleasure men. That is, I guess, what we would say is why the digital form is taking the sexting stuff. We are seeing young women's sexuality used against them. It is like currency, I guess. It can be used against women by young men. For young men it becomes a bit of a status symbol if you have managed to get pictures and stuff of young women.

In terms of the education that is occurring, currently we would actually see that some of that education is actually just reinforcing those norms. We are doing some scare stuff, and we are doing that pretty well and maybe it is having an impact, but we are not actually challenging the idea that the social norms at the bottom of it can be questioned — that idea that young men actually have a choice about how they relate to young women, and that is around some of the messaging around respectful relationships and sex education. Young guys are not at the mercy of their libido. They can actually see a picture of a young woman and choose not to pass it on.

They can actually have a relationship with a young woman and not need a picture of her on their smart phone to have some cred on the street. Similarly, young women can be valued without needing to display themselves online and in online forums.

Mr NORTHE — Michelle, just in regard to your submission, you talk about some of the education and awareness campaigns that may not have worked. Can you run us through your ideas around the VicHealth proposition that you have put forward and just talk about that a little bit more?

Ms HUNT — Are people familiar with the *Tagged* DVD, which was the big, most recent campaign that came out? It is a great, well-produced, 20-minute video, which has great support material but actually just has this idea that a young guy gets a picture of his girlfriend with another young guy and he thinks that she must be seeing him behind her back, so these young guys have a fight over it. There is no critical questioning about why he thinks it is okay to get in a fight in an ownership kind of role of this young woman. He then spreads a picture of this young woman to get back at her. It plays out in a way that never actually says, ‘You know what, it is not okay to think that you can get in a fight with someone over possessiveness of a very young woman and it is not okay to think that when you feel like you have been wronged you actually will send a sexual image of a former partner around’ — that that is actually a form of sexual violence. It highlights the fact that there would be criminal sanctions for it and you could get on the child sex offenders register, but it does not actually get to the moral undertones of that stuff.

Recently there was a competition run in the US, What’s Your Story. A school put together a video snippet where they questioned sexting and they had a young guy actually stop and go, ‘No, I’m not going to send this image’. Then the conversation would be about how he is still masculine and he is still a good guy. He just does not need to send those pictures — that that has repercussions for her, and it has repercussions for his self-esteem because of how he has treated someone who he has been intimate with. It is actually emphasising the fact that there are choices for young men and for young women and that sometimes that is actually stepping outside the gendered norms and the gendered expectations rather than just thinking it is going to happen — it plays out this way because you are a male and you are a female.

Mr NORTHE — Just further on that, in terms of getting VicHealth involved, what is the logic and thinking behind that?

Ms HUNT — We would be saying one of the key areas that we work in is around the prevention of violence against women and the underlying causes of that. We would say that the framework is the same around that stuff, about ensuring there is consistent messaging for young people in all aspects of their life — whether it is the programs that are rolling out across sporting clubs about respectful relationships and Fair Game Respect Matters, whether it is about the respectful relationship education that is rolling out across schools or whether it is the sex ed. stuff that they are doing. That cybereducation actually has the same underpinnings — it is about questioning the gender norms, because we know that when the message is consistent people will hear it much more than if they are getting splish-sploshes of different messaging from different forums.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Would you think the most effective strategy is to stop the photos being taken? Is that the strategy that you would use for both the girls and boys — stop and think before you — —

Ms HUNT — In some ways. Maybe we do not know enough culturally about how the way young people’s relationships form is changing in a digital world. Maybe it is a new form of intimacy to have pictures of your girlfriend and stuff. But when they are actually being shared — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Exactly, and the risk of that is so high.

Ms HUNT — We would be questioning why we think it is okay to share. There is the underlying stuff about why young women feel a need to — —

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Have the photo in the first place.

Ms HUNT — Yes. But then there is also why young guys think it is okay to share it. It is that ‘power over’ stuff — that they can use it against young women, and they do so.

Mrs PETROVICH — Thank you very much for your presentation. A lot of the issues you have raised are very much at the nexus of where we are at with this: the fact that we cannot disentangle communication from cyber and the fact that we have a highly sexualised culture through media and multimedia. However, I am concerned about the whole issue of gender stereotyping. I have posed a question to you both on the issue of young women purveying child pornography by sending photos of themselves and other women to other women and to young men. We do need to take care in making this a male-only issue, because I think it is a societal issue. I pose the question to you around education and how we can best enable young people to deal with a highly sexualised community and a world in which cyber interaction is intrinsic.

Ms HUNT — We would certainly agree that it is a society issue and that because it is a society issue young men and young women are just as likely as each other to take on the messaging. Young women's power or sexuality can be used in negative ways against them by other young women as well as by young men.

Mrs PETROVICH — And against young men.

Ms HUNT — Yes, absolutely. Similarly, young men are potentially being put in situations where they feel that to be considered okay by their peer group they need to delve into this stuff, too, and that if they do not do it, they are going to lose some credibility and be called all different things.

We would suggest that we need to talk to young people about sex, about their sexual selves and about what that means, because if we do not, they will look to other sources. We know young people have pornography more available to them than ever before. The images that pornography sends to young men and young women about both of their identities and what is okay and not okay are not helpful for either sex. It says that men are expected to be powerful and strong and look a certain way, young women are there to pleasure them and the way of being is heterosexual and not diverse. Maybe we need to have more conversations with young people about this stuff so they can develop these identities in more healthy ways.

Ms MAHONEY — In talking about some of that gender stuff, we do not have good evidence in the sexting space yet, but in Australia we know that one in three women will experience physical violence from the age of 15 and one in five sexual violence. We do not have in-depth evidence around sexting, but we do know at a state and national level that violence is disproportionately gendered, that it is a women's experience. We are saying that the rates of violence would suggest that this is about women's experience more than men's. That is not to take away from everything we agree on and what you are sharing of this, it is around the broader social norms that are allowing this. It is worth investigating and looking at those norms and how they shape young people's ability to understand their sexuality, to make choices about their sexuality and about whether to share images or not.

One of the things that is interesting, and I am not sure if it is in here, is that in a respectful and safe relationship it is possible to share these images and for them to go no further. That is probably a very interesting one. Coming back to what you asked before, Russell, there is that sense that it is really important that we have cybereducation. We really need it, it is really important messaging and it is good for people to understand it, but without education around respect for relationships and making choices about how you treat people cybereducation is not sufficient. You need to have the two together, and that is where we have come to the thinking around the VicHealth framework. The VicHealth framework starts talking about what are the norms that mean it is okay for me to share this image, and what are the norms that make it less okay for me to say, 'No'? It opens those discussions.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — The risks are so great, aren't they? The capacity is that once it is shared, whether it be with 1 person or 100, it is out there.

Ms HUNT — Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — At this age group it is so volatile and people are not necessarily making appropriate choices just by the inherent nature of what they are going through. So while I agree with you that it may be possible to do it, my great concern is, as it is for all of us, that the risks and ramifications for the individuals involved can be so great, so quickly, and they cannot be taken back.

Ms MAHONEY — Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Do you have any sense from your interactions with your stakeholders as to what impact the role of the sex offenders register has on people's views about the behaviour?

Ms HUNT — The young people themselves?

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Yes.

Ms HUNT — I recently read some research where they talked about it too. Young people are really clear about the risk of paedos. You can hear them talk about the risk of befriending strangers online and stuff like that. So whether they actually get that it is the same when it is happening in what they see as a private space — which we see as a public space — with their friends on Facebook type of thing, I am not fully sure that they do.

Ms MAHONEY — I would say possibly not.

Ms HUNT — Yes, that it is the same thing. I do not know.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Which is where education is critical too.

Ms HUNT — Yes, because their biggest risk is their peer group. That is who is most likely to actually be most abusive towards them. It is most likely going to be their peer group which is going to distribute an image that is going to cause them damage, not some creepy guy who lives on the other side of the world. I do not know whether it is really clear in their minds that that is the same thing. Similarly, I think the other important point — one that I think is really important — is that the young people most at risk offline are the people most at risk online. Vulnerable young people offline, because they do not have the parental or social supports or they are socially isolated or whatever, are actually the group that is probably most likely going to be the victim in this area as well. Similarly, they are most likely to be engaging in underage sex and using alcohol and drugs at a young age and stuff. It is actually that group who is most at risk. It is the vulnerable young people.

Mrs PETROVICH — Groups such as yours have the potential to get to the heart of these issues. How do you access young people with the networks that you are using at the moment? Do they come to you, or do you go into the community to talk about the issues of cybersafety and sexting?

Ms HUNT — In the project that I work on at the moment, webWise, we work with a group of young people at a secondary college who are what we call peer educators; they are trained up to then send messages out to their peer groups. At the moment they are a year 11 and 12 group who are developing some stuff that they will then deliver to the new year 7s, 8s and 9s. That is how they are delving into this world. Because there is such a need — everyone wants this stuff — they have also been doing some stuff with their football and netball club. They delivered a session there, and similarly to another local community group that asked us, too. But we could certainly do much more. Everybody wants something in their communities because it is an issue.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you very much, both of you.

Mr NORTHE — Yes, and obviously for travelling away.

Ms MAHONEY — Just Ballarat today, so not a super distance. We are not in the hills at Halls Gap or anything.

Mr NORTHE — Oh, good, okay.

Ms HUNT — Just an hour on V/Line.

Mr NORTHE — It is a big area.

The DEPUTY CHAIR — Thank you. That was helpful.

Ms MAHONEY — Thank you.

Ms HUNT — Thank you very much.

Witnesses withdrew.