

FEBRUARY 2022

Police Journal

THE OTHER PANDEMIC

"In this job things can go gravely wrong very quickly if we don't have the right expertise and understanding."





THE OTHER PANDEMIC



Two arrests came in separate cases of alleged domestic murder in Australia just last month. More critical than ever now is that Child and Family Investigation sections retain their most capable investigators.

By Brett Williams



INVESTIGATIONS

It was one of those crimes that disgust the public and call for a highly specialized police response. A despicable act of violent shaking had left a vulnerable two-month-old baby boy with a severe, long-term brain injury.

Paramedics – who understood him to be having seizures and struggling to breathe – had rushed to his aid.

He was soon in a hospital ICU ward on a ventilator and with major internal head injuries, including a brain bleed.

Detective Brevet Sergeant Gaye Kittel took on the subsequent investigation into the attack on the infant. Attached to Southern District Child and Family Investigation Section, and highly expert in her field, she soon had a suspect: the baby's 14-year-old father.

He denied hurting his child but Kittel went about gathering crucial evidence to prove his guilt and arrested him. She worked with other professionals like forensic paediatricians who established the “mechanism of the injury”.

Also for her to prove was that no one besides the father was in the house where and when baby suffered the shaking.

And, in other evidence-gathering, Kittel listened to prison phone calls her suspect had undertaken. She heard him talk to the baby's mother, a 16-year-old who was still “really engaged” with the father.

“What we see in a lot of these cases is parents siding with the offending partners instead of being protective of their own children,” Kittel says. “That can be really difficult to understand and work through.”

Among the phone calls Kittel listened to were moments of casual conversation not even related to the baby. The father, in one exchange, asked the mother not about his brain-damaged little boy but whether she had picked up his Nike boots.

While the young mother remained bizarrely loyal to her child's abuser, Kittel – who holds a master's degree in clinical psychology – never gave up trying to engage her.

“She was quite resistant,” Kittel recalls. “But that's where your skill comes in with trying to

be flexible around her relationship with the father. That's then a point of engagement to try to work out exactly what's happened.”

Ultimately, Kittel caught the father out in a phone conversation in which he admitted that he had indeed assaulted his son. She was able to show that he had thrown and bounced the child on a bed but also shaken him violently above his (the father's) head.

Cops know that atrocities like this one abound. Both the closed and active case files of Child and Family Investigation sections are full of them.

Kittel and her Southern District CFIS colleagues manage multiple cases of relationship-based offences simultaneously.

On their caseloads are investigations into choking and strangulation offences, sexual assaults, child grooming and abuse, stalking, financial abuse, criminal neglect, baby and child deaths. The list goes on up to stabbings, rape, murder and attempted murder.

At the centre of a current Kittel investigation is a toddler left with cracked ribs and a torn pancreas. Allegedly the victim of his stepfather, the 18-month-old wound up in intensive care but has survived.

Kittel also has charge of a domestic-violence case to which she has had to bring her skills as a prescribed interviewer of vulnerable witnesses. Her interview subject was a nine-year-old girl who had allegedly seen her father repeatedly choke her mother and threaten her with a knife.

“The (seated) nine-year-old's feet didn't even touch the ground during the interview because she was so small,” Kittel recalls. “It's those small observations that stay with me.”

The experience Kittel drew on in those investigations came from an eight-year stint with the Paedophile Task Force and her time (now six-plus years) with Southern District CFIS.

She showed – and continues to show – that she and her equally experienced colleagues know the field of relationship-based offending better than anyone.

And what CFIS detectives and uniformed members see, as they investigate relational abuse and violence, never leaves them.

Senior Constable Paul Adams joined SD CFIS for what he expected to be just a six-month stint back in 2008. Now, 14 years later and still with the section, he has likely investigated more than 1,000 cases of domestic violence.

He speaks of victims he sees in hospital with injuries like shattered jaws and smashed eye sockets, all inflicted by violent partners.

One repeatedly violent offender he recalls – and describes as “a giant of a bloke” – often slapped his petite wife so hard that he ruptured her eardrums.

The wife never reported his ongoing violence until he one day slapped her in the head while she was holding their youngest child.

As the impact of the blow sent her flying across the room, she lost her grip on the child, who also went “flying into tables and chairs”.

Detective Brevet Sergeant Zoe Gooch remembers the repeated stabbing of a woman whose partner of only two months held her captive in 2018. He (the partner) had become violent toward the woman after turning up at her house unannounced but initially quite affable.

With enough force to knock her off her feet, he belted her in the head with an object of some kind and then tied her up with a cord. Bashed and defenceless, she then endured hours of verbal abuse from him until, at one point during the night, he armed himself with some knives.

He stabbed and slashed her legs, wrapped the cord around her neck, walked her around the house and told her she was in his control. As blood poured out of her wounds, the crazed man took her into the bathroom where he told her he intended to kill her.

He also tried but failed to hack one of her fingers off before a wave of guilt seemed to wash over him. In his altered mood, he put the woman into her bed, lay down with her, and said they would die together.

But she had the presence of mind to come up with a ruse to save herself. She convinced her attacker that a worker was due to turn up and would find him. And the tactic worked. He took off and she lay there bleeding as she called the police.

“He was sunk, and, in my opinion, sunk on that one thing that the child did, and that I managed to get from her as evidence.”



Senior Constable First Class Lauren Solly

After Gooch arrived, she checked out the house and could see “blood everywhere”. And, later, in hospital, she and her partner were to face a seemingly impossible start to their investigation.

The ravaged woman lay in bed with her eyes swollen shut, blood over her face and through her hair, and her legs and arm bandaged.

But Gooch had plenty of experience and specialist skill to apply to the task: she had performed multiple stints with CFIS throughout her 10-year CIB career. She drew on all that to help the woman provide a “very structured account” of the attack.

Gooch stuck with the case which, owing to her investigative expertise, ended with a conviction and 10-year jail sentence for the woman’s attacker.

Senior Constable First Class Lauren Solly, one of the most experienced of all CFIS members, allocates case files to investigators. She took on the role two years ago after she had herself worked as a domestic-violence investigator.

And, like her colleagues, she can speak of many cases which remain firmly with her. One involved a girl under 10 and her father, who was sexually abusing not only her but also other members of his family.

It was up to Solly to get the girl to talk about the abuse her father had inflicted on her. All the painful details were, of course, necessary if a court were ever to convict him.

Solly knew well the art of gathering evidence from children and so undertook the delicate process of taking a statement from the girl.

Clearly feeling at ease with Solly, she revealed that, at night, she used to jam a pen under her bedroom door. Then, whenever her father came to prey on her, the noise he would make forcing the door open would wake her.

“As soon as I took that statement,” Solly says, “all I could think was: ‘Oh, my God. This poor child. I just want to hug you and tell you you’re so brave.’”

“But, as a police officer, I’m balancing that with: ‘This is fricking great evidence!’”

Solly briefed the detective investigating the case and insisted that he check the bedroom floor for evidence to corroborate the girl’s statement.

“Sure enough,” she says, “they (detectives) go lock the father up, and on the floor is this dug-out kind of indentation where she’s put the pen.

“He was sunk, and, in my opinion, sunk on that one thing that the child did, and that I managed to get from her as evidence.”

Senior Sergeant Susan Lock is perhaps the ultimate authority on sexual-assault victims and child protection – at least from a police perspective.

Her work with those victims, and as an investigative interviewer of children, extends back 30-plus years.

Now a manager in Family and Domestic Violence in the Policy and Training Unit, she has the experience of hundreds of investigations on which to draw.

Among them are cases like the one of an eight-year-old girl whom an adult offender sexually assaulted in front of her 10-year-old brother.

The offender, then a family friend, had the okay to drive the children to his property in the family's ute, ostensibly to see a horse.

Once there, he separated the girl from her brother and tried but failed in his first attempt to sexually assault her.

He tried again later, on the drive back home. Soon after starting out, he pulled over and ordered the brother out of the cabin and into the ute's tub. The boy, however, would not leave his sister.

So, the offender simply committed his assault on the girl anyway. He forced her into an act of fellatio on him – in front of her brother.

Afterward, as he continued the drive home, he asked the children if they intended to tell their parents what had happened. When they said yes, he asked them to promise to wait until the following morning so he could say goodbye to his son.

"The next morning, as they're driving to school, the little girl disclosed what had happened," Lock recalls. "She'd kept her promise of not saying anything.

"So, the mum just turns the car around and brought her straight into the police station, and that's when I interviewed her. And she was magnificent.

"The detective on the case was magnificent, too. He really supported the family and did a great investigation. He worked in Child and Family and, again, it comes back to experience.

"The offender ended up pleading guilty and got something like eight years."

"We're dealing with the potential of putting children back into sexual abuse situations if we don't have the right skill and expertise."



EXPERIENCE

Lock and others speak of experience as critical in the investigation of relational offending. That makes South Australia fortunate to have plenty of experience and perceptive minds among its current CFIS investigators.

While those investigators operate without a hint of hubris, they know how much risk their absence from the field would present.

Their expert advice is to leave investigators in place for unlimited periods. Metropolitan Operations Service management, however, compels CFIS detective sergeants and brevet sergeants to transfer out into other CIB areas within MOS every two years.

"In this job," Gaye Kittel says, "things

can go gravely wrong very quickly if we don't have the right expertise and understanding.

"We're dealing with people's lives. We're dealing with the potential of putting children back into sexual abuse situations if we don't have the right skill and expertise. We're dealing with the potential for offenders to murder their victims.

"We have to pick up on the subtleties of victim behaviour and responses and actually tap into that. We have to understand someone who perhaps isn't reacting like we think they should, even if it's hostile towards us.

"We have to understand trauma responses, gather evidence and, at the same time, not retraumatize victims.



Detective Brevet Sergeant
Gaye Kittel



Detective Brevet Sergeant Damon Roberts

“... you just can’t rotate people through on a regular basis. You need people who want to be there. You need people who have experience in working in the section.”

And there are jobs where our intervention stops children being sexually abused and changes lives.”

Another onus on investigators is to understand the dynamics of non-physical coercive control, like the constant monitoring of a victim’s whereabouts. It is a common theme in the offences they investigate and, as Kittel explains, a precursor to violence.

“I can’t imagine a unit like ours running without our core group of experienced people,” she says. “Our investigations of relational domestic crimes are inherently complex, so it’s imperative to have our level of skill, expertise, dedication, interest and knowledge. It reduces risks.”

Detective Brevet Sergeant Damon Roberts joined Southern District CFIS in April last year and five months later stepped up to relieve as a supervisor. Already he thinks of experience in the section as simply “vital”.

“Because of how long it takes (for new

members) to learn the role,” he says. “And I’d say it takes 18 months to two years before you start to feel comfortable within this role. Even for me, with my CIB experience, it was a real steep learning curve.”

Just one of many critical understandings Roberts had to come to was which, and how, outside agencies collaborate with CFIS.

Among them are the ODPP, Department for Child Protection, Women’s and Children’s Hospital Child Protection Services, the Homelessness Gateway and the Migrant Women’s Support Service.

“They all have specific roles and different involvement,” Roberts explains. “And you have to know exactly what they all do.”

“So, with CFIS, you just can’t rotate people through on a regular basis. You need people who want to be there. You need people who have experience in working in the section.”



Senior Sergeant Susan Lock

“(Imagine) you’re not an experienced interviewer and you go to interview a child in the matter of a serious sexual offence. And because of that (inexperience) the child makes no disclosures.”

“That offender won’t then be held to account and will go on to abuse other children, because these people don’t ever have just one victim. They have many.”

Detective Brevet Sergeant Rhys Williams served with Northern District CFIS for six months before he joined SD CFIS in December 2020. Even as a less experienced member of the section, he struggles to think of a relational offence he has not investigated or had a hand in investigating.

But he has reaped the benefit of working alongside his seasoned colleagues, like Kittel and Detective Brevet Sergeant Hannah Clarke.

“What I’ve learnt from them, and the skills they’ve imparted to me through their knowledge and experience, has been invaluable,” he says.

“I think the area would struggle without people who have been there for as long as they have. They’re obviously there because they want to do the job and are good at it. To have those people there is invaluable.”

Susan Lock explains that not all police officers can, or want, to work in the field of relational offending. And she insists that no one *should* work in a CFIS if it is not his or her preference. She speaks of the need for cops to be “the right fit” for the role.

“(Imagine) you’re not an experienced interviewer and you go to interview a child in the matter of a serious sexual offence,” Lock says. “And because of that (inexperience) the child makes no disclosures.”

“That offender won’t then be held to account and will go on to abuse other children, because these people don’t ever have just one victim. They have many.”

Brevet Sergeant Colette Nunke currently works with Lock in Policy and Training and speaks with the authority of international experience.

As a police officer in the United Kingdom, she worked in child protection and in South Australia has served with Victim Management Section.

She considers that in her field, police deal with “the most vulnerable victims and witnesses in society” – children and young people.

“So,” she says, “it needs to be the right person who’s engaging with them right from the start of the process. That’s why (investigating relational offences) is so specialized.

“You’re looking for somebody who can engage with children, chat with people, be interpersonal, and recognize traumatic behaviour.”

While CFIS members speak of the demand for experience, they also insist that no investigator would succeed without specific character traits.

Kittel explains that if CFIS investigators were not naturally empathetic, compassionate, patient, understanding and non-judgemental they would never connect with victims.

“That’s because you’re dealing with such intense grief in families,” she says. “And it’s such a fine line to cross between compassion and empathy on one hand and open-mindedness and suspicion on the other.

“They don’t really go hand in hand, but they need to for a detective in this role. And there’s just so much skill involved in being one as well as the other.”

Williams, too, speaks of the importance of those character traits which best enable investigators to connect with victims.

“You need to build a relationship,” he explains. “You can’t just come up to someone and say: ‘Hey, I heard something happened to you when you were younger. Tell me about how this person violated you.’

“It doesn’t work that way. You need to give something of yourself. I can’t just be Detective Williams. I have to be Rhys as well.

“I have to be a support for them, too, because I’m the one who knows the process. I’m the one who knows what’s going to happen and I need to prepare them for that.”

“The first thing they say to you once they get into some of the stuff, is: ‘My God, I never knew there was so much to do. It just keeps coming.’”



Senior Constable Paul Adams

PRESSURE

While the media have their slow news days and firefighters have shifts without any flames to extinguish, CFIS investigators know nothing of slowdowns.

They speak of a continuously heavy workload which has around 20 active files allocated to each investigator at a time.

Paul Adams has many times noticed how the “sheer volume of work” sparks

a reaction from unsuspecting newcomers to the section.

“The first thing they say to you,” he says, “once they get into some of the stuff, is: ‘My God, I never knew there was so much to do. It just keeps coming.’”

Damon Roberts, who calls the workload “huge”, explains how the section receives up to 30 notifications a day from the Child Abuse Report Line.

“About 130 intakes a month is not unusual,” he says. “They come to you as the supervisor and you’ve got to allocate them out. And these have to be actioned within 24 hours.”

Roberts also explains that, in many cases, investigators have to “decipher” volumes of complex medical notes, analyse accounting spreadsheets, and scour government and non-government documents.

Indeed, Roberts contends that “an investigator’s role is numerous professions cloaked as one”.

And to hear a CFIS investigator describe his or her typical workday is to understand that it is frenetic. Kittel, for example, might start out with an interview of a child sexual-assault victim and, immediately after, respond to and deal with a domestic-violence strangling and rape.

“Then,” she says, “I might come back from that and get a fresh job coming in from our daily influx of mandatory notifications from the Department for Child Protection. There’s a constant flow of those every day.

“Then I might come back from those jobs and there’s a phone call from a distressed mother who’s just found out that her child’s been sexually abused. And then, on top of that, you’ve got lawyers’ requests.”

Just recently, Kittel saw two of her colleagues caught up in precisely the scenario she describes. First, they responded to a teen suicide. Then, after returning to the CFIS office, they had to respond to and investigate an alleged domestic-violence rape.

In that case, they arrested a suspect and had to work overtime. And both investigators already had substantial caseloads.

“We’re racing from one job to the next and to the next,” Kittel says. “There’s so many directions that we’re pulled into virtually every minute of the day.

“So, there’s a lot of demand and a lot of pressure. The toughest aspect of the job for me is the huge volume of work.”

And, of course, victims suffer through their crises not just in office hours but 24 hours per day. So, for reassurance, they sometimes reach out to an investigator in his or her downtime.

“It can be quite draining, but we’re really invested in what we do. We want the best for victims who we try to help, but it takes a lot (to get that).”

Detective Brevet Sergeant Rhys Williams



Says Williams: “I get after-hours calls from victims who say: ‘What’s going on? How are things going?’ Sometimes they just want someone to talk to for five or 10 minutes.

“I don’t think you can be entirely removed from giving a part of yourself to each investigation. And, at the moment, I’m dealing with 21.

“It can be quite draining, but we’re really invested in what we do. We want the best for victims who we try to help, but it takes a lot (to get that).”

Some cite burnout as justification for the two-year tenure which applies to CFIS members. The idea is that, in such emotion-charged environments with such horrific crimes, particularly against children, no investigator can sustain his or her role for longer periods.

But investigators, with their front-line experience and expertise, reject that notion out of hand. The clear consensus among them is that, if burnout occurs, it results not from the work but rather the workload.

Susan Lock is among those who do not buy into the idea that tenure is best for investigators.

“There’s research to dispute it,” she says, “by Professor Martine Powell. She’s done papers on it, and it’s not (the work). It’s probably more the workload.

“So, you could move members within the branch so they’re still in that line of work, just to give them a break.

“But it’s probably more detrimental to move somebody, who’s an expert and passionate, out of that role.”

Kittel insists that one way to ease the pressure on CFIS members is simply to create time-out periods for them in the workplace.

“Just to take a little bit of time to just slow down,” she says, “even for a few minutes. Just to talk to a colleague about the job you’ve just come back from is enormously important.

“Not being able to have that space or gap in amongst all our jobs is an issue that can create burnout in the long run.”

As much as CFIS members might try to forget about work on days off, it can and does easily creep into their thoughts. It is not so much the visions of bashed, hospitalized women or confused, fear-struck children that they find on their minds.

Rather, it is an inventory of all the responsibilities they have to their investigations and associated victims.

“I think a lot about whether I’ve managed everything and done all I possibly can for people, to keep them safe,” Kittel says.

“If there’s a domestic-abuse murder on the TV news, I often think about my cases. Statistics show that, on average, there’s one domestic murder in Australia every week. So, I watch the news and hope that none of my cases are going to end up as the next murder on TV.”

Gooch thinks similarly, particularly when she has to deal with a hot job.

“If you’re home,” she says, “you’re thinking: ‘Have I done everything? Is everything in line? Is that person safe? Have I forgotten something?’

“It’s definitely a process to make sure you don’t do it because you could go home and think about it all night.”

Even as he spoke to the *Police Journal*, Williams was thinking about the shift he was to work that afternoon (September 28).

“I’m thinking of the statements I have to take today, the investigations I’ve got, which people I should call and catch up with today,” he said.

“I’m always thinking of the things that I need to do. That’s okay for me: it’s something that I can manage and deal with. I am able to switch off, but it’s always there.”

COMMITMENT

Of the Southern District CFIS members who spoke to the *Police Journal*, each joined the section by choice - and is content there.

Outsiders might wonder how that can be, given the endless trauma, emotion and sheer evil investigators have to confront and, of course, the workload.

The idea of a position in CFIS holds little, if any, appeal to most cops, as Zoe Gooch and others know.

Says Gooch: “You hear people say, and I’ve had people say to me: ‘I couldn’t do that work. I never want to do that work. Couldn’t cope.’

“We want to be there and we find it can be difficult. I couldn’t imagine someone who didn’t want to be there (in terms of) how difficult they’d find it. I’d feel for that person.”

To Damon Roberts, CFIS does have appeal, despite what he has seen: women so severely bashed that they cannot see out of their bloodshot eyes owing to strangulation. He has also seen bruised, battered children who wrongly thought that they deserved their injuries.

The father of two concedes that he finds it “challenging” to deal with offenders who think nothing of “bashing their partners and children”.

“It’s genuinely heartbreaking,” he says, “(but) I love the work. I love dealing with these victims and being able to help them.

“The people who work in CFIS are so dedicated to their job and love what they do.”

Lauren Solly also found it tough to deal with upset child victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

She had seen plenty of gore and dead bodies as cops do early in their police careers. But, for her, nothing compared with “the rawness” of children who had to relive their horror for her to document.



“I’ve been back and forth between CFIS and other sections, so I’ve known when I’ve needed a change and I’ve made that decision myself.

“I don’t feel that, with the experience

I have, I need someone making that decision for me. I’m an adult; and I want to be doing this work long-term, so I think I can make that decision.”

It was sometimes hard for her to contain her emotion but she was in the environment in which she had always wanted to work – and “make a difference”.

“I could be that person talking to the mother or the children or the dad and trying to get people on side to make better choices,” she says.

“I don’t think there’s a better role that you can deal with in the police department than help people from that perspective.”

Gooch, a mother of two, sees child victims as unable to be a voice for themselves. So, simply acting for children has been the motivation for her to commit herself to CFIS.

Like her colleagues, she finds aspects of the job stressful. Striving to get disclosures from children in the interview process is one she highlights.

But the stresses of the job in no way diminish her commitment.

“I’m passionate about the work,” she says. “I’ve been in sections where it was harder for me to arrive every day and do the work than it is (at CFIS).

“I’ve been back and forth between CFIS and other sections, so I’ve known when I’ve needed a change and I’ve made that decision myself.

“I don’t feel that, with the experience I have, I need someone making that decision for me. I’m an adult; and I want to be doing this work long-term, so I think I can make that decision.”

Kittel highlights the international view of relational offending: that it is a

worldwide crisis, a silent pandemic.

She acknowledges the role of other agencies’ responders but considers police capable of having the most impact.

Ultimately, she regards it as simply a privilege to “care for people on the worst day of their lives”.

“I’m really at my best when I’m in that sort of role,” she explains. “And, at the end of the day, we’re keeping children safe, so I find it intensely satisfying.”

“The key to it (success in the field) is sufficient training and retaining investigators with those skills and experience.”



Brevet Sergeant Colette Nunke

TRAINING

Susan Lock speaks of the job of a CFIS investigator as a “specialist role” which demands specialized training. She now uses her vast experience for that purpose: to develop and provide high-quality training for child-abuse investigators.

“Children do make good witnesses, providing adults ask good questions,” she says. “That requires ongoing training and regular practice in the skills.

“It’s no good if you’ve done a training course two years ago and are then expected to interview a child. If you’re not regularly using your skill you’ll lose it, and research shows that.”

Colette Nunke, who works with Lock, emphasizes the importance of training the right people to qualify as prescribed interviewers.

“We want to train people who want to progress (in this specialist field) and use that skill on a regular basis,” she says.

“The key to it (success in the field) is sufficient training and retaining investigators with those skills and experience.”

Of the courses Lock and her colleagues have developed, one is based on the interagency code of practice and teaches how to investigate allegations of child abuse.

It runs for three days and focuses on working with external agencies to provide a holistic response to child protection.

“If you want to go on to become a prescribed interviewer,” Lock says, “you can then apply for a planned intensive five-day course.

“It will only be for a small number of participants and there’s lots of theory but also lots of practice.

“After that, it’s about regular refresher training and also getting these prescribed interviewers to submit their interviews and we’ll assess them.

“It’s really about turning the role of interviewing vulnerable witnesses into a specialist role.” PJ



Since taking part in their interviews for this story:

- **Detective Brevet Sergeant Rhys Williams has left Southern District CFIS and returned to SD CIB.**
- **Detective Brevet Sergeant Zoe Gooch has been furloughed and is therefore not currently working with Southern District CFIS.**