



## **Misrepresentation of social workers is a risk to vulnerable West Australians**

In August 2013, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) became aware of a media report which referred to a person charged with serious offences as a well known social worker. The person has reportedly been charged with 32 accounts of sexually abusing six boys, aged between 11 and 17 while working as an education officer and an adolescent counselling psychotherapist. The alleged offences were reported to have occurred in 1991 and 1992. The media reports state that the person is also facing a further set of charges which will significantly increase the number of alleged victims.

The AASW has established that the named person, whose case is still before the courts, is not nor ever has been a member of our professional association. However, the media reports remain a concern and pose issues for the AASW, for social work more broadly in Australia and for vulnerable people such as children/young people who access social work services.

Firstly, this person may well hold a professional qualification in social work (though this is unlikely based on descriptions of the person's qualifications in other media reports and from the person's own website). As social work is still an unregistered profession, if this is the case, the AASW has no formal recourse in suspending/stopping non-member social workers from practicing. If the profession was formally registered, and this person was a social worker, they could be immediately suspended from practice due to the seriousness of the allegations.

Secondly, if, contrary to the media report, the person does not hold a professional qualification in social work, it continues to raise serious issues for the AASW and the social work profession more broadly. 'Social work' is not a protected title and therefore, can be used to describe anyone or be used by anyone to describe themselves, whether they hold a professional qualification in social work or not. A professional social work qualification is a minimum four year undergraduate degree or two year masters degree from an accredited university course.

Whichever is the case; these reports present further arguments for the need to include social work as a registered profession in Australia with full protection of title. With no recourse against social workers who choose not to be members of the AASW, who may act unethically, or cause harm to others, the public is at serious risk. While every effort has been made by the AASW to implement self-regulation, it is impossible to monitor the standards of practice of those working outside of this framework, and those who use the title 'social worker' without holding a professional social work qualification.

There is much evidence highlighting the damage that has been caused and continues to be caused by incompetent, rogue or unqualified social work/other practitioners. This must stop. If practitioners who do not hold a professional qualification in social work are able to describe themselves or are described as a social worker and act unethically, illegally or cause harm to others, the public is still at risk from unsuitably qualified 'practitioners'. The public confidence

in those who do hold a professional qualification in social work and who are ethical, competent practitioners is also significantly diminished.

The AASW continues to call for national registration of the social work profession. Please [visit the AASW's website](#) for more information around the call for national registration of social workers.

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