**PapScreen Victoria and CASA Forum are working together to support women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault to access cervical screening in a safe and comfortable environment.**

CASA Forum represents the 15 Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) and the Sexual Assault Crisis Line. CASAs provide free and confidential counselling, advocacy for victim/survivors of past and recent sexual assault and 24 hour crisis care for victim/survivors for up to two weeks following a sexual assault.

**What is sexual assault?**

Sexual assault is any behaviour of a sexual nature that a person has not agreed to, that makes them feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened.

Twelve per cent of women have experienced sexual violence before the age of 15, and 19 per cent since the age of 15.¹

**The link between sexual assault and cervical screening**

Currently, around 60 per cent of Victorian women are participating in cervical screening as recommended, with this figure likely to be lower for victim/survivors of sexual assault.

Research² shows that some women who have encountered sexual assault are more likely to avoid having regular Pap tests, as the invasive nature of the procedure can induce:

- feelings of vulnerability, helplessness or shame
- memories or flashbacks during or after the Pap test
- embarrassment
- fear, pain and/or anxiety
- physical and emotional discomfort.

**Impacts of sexual assault**

The impacts of sexual assault have been shown to be extensive and include:

- depression
- anxiety disorders
- substance abuse
- eating disorders
- suicidal behaviour/self-injury including to the genitals
- borderline personality disorder
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- dissociation.
Supporting victim/survivors of sexual assault to have a Pap test

While the following points are best practice guidelines for all women, these are particularly important when working with victim/survivors of sexual assault.

- Offer a preliminary appointment to build rapport and trust with the woman and then make a subsequent appointment for her to return for the Pap test.
- Reassure the woman that the consultation is private and confidential.
- Take the time to explain the procedure to the woman and offer to show her the speculum or sampling instruments.
- Encourage her to ask any questions that will reduce her anxiety.
- Provide the woman with the option to bring along a friend or relative for support.
- Remind her that she is in control and can stop the Pap test at any time.
- Instruct her on calming and deep breathing techniques to help her relax.
- Elevate the pelvis with a cushion rather than the woman using her fists.
- Offer the woman the option to insert her own speculum.

It is essential that you are responsive to the emotional and physical reactions of each woman and adjust your approach accordingly.

Full clinical practice guidelines for nurse cervical screening providers can be found at www.papscreen.org.au

How to ask about sexual assault

In your role as a nurse cervical screening provider you will need to use your judgement and experience to determine if and when to ask about sexual assault.

If you choose to, there are many ways you can begin to ask about a possible history of past trauma/sexual assault.

For example:

- ‘Have you ever had an uncomfortable Pap test experience in the past? If so, it may be helpful to let me know why this was difficult for you.’
- ‘Have you had any experiences that might impact you having a Pap test now?’
- ‘We know that sexual assault is very common and we do know that it can impact on sexual health. Is there anything you want to talk about today?’

Responding to a disclosure of sexual assault

In instances where a woman does disclose a history of sexual assault and/or past trauma it is advisable that as a nurse cervical screening provider you:

- **Use clear statements that show you believe/accept the woman’s story and wish to support her.**
  - ‘It must have been hard for you to tell me about this.’
  - ‘Would you like to talk with someone more about the impact this has had on you?’

- **Offer appropriate referral options.**
  Women who would like to talk to a qualified counsellor can call 1800 806 292 where they will be connected to their local CASA during business hours or the Victorian Sexual Assault Crisis Line after hours.

Access to CASA services is available 24 hours a day. This includes crisis counselling, information and crisis care, and referral to relevant support services.

Debriefing and secondary consultation for you as a health professional

Following a consultation with a woman impacted by sexual assault, you can ring CASAs for debriefing and secondary consultation. Call 1800 806 292 during business hours to be connected to your local CASA to speak with the Duty Counsellor.

CASA Forum endorsed nurse cervical screening providers

There are nurse cervical screening providers who have been endorsed by CASA Forum and PapScreen Victoria to provide sensitive cervical screening consultations to victim/survivors of sexual assault. For a full list of these nurses and more information regarding the application process, visit www.papscreen.org.au

REFERENCES