

**A BASELINE STUDY OF THE LEVEL OF  
AWARENESS AMONGST PUBLIC SERVICE  
PROVIDERS OF THE EFFECTS OF  
INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE ON SURVIVORS**



**A Report prepared for Caranua**

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**By**

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## **Executive Summary and Recommendations**

### **1. Baseline Study of the Level of Awareness amongst Public Service Providers of the Effects of Institutional Abuse on the Individuals who experienced it.**

A large majority of the research participants have very low levels of awareness and understanding of the effects of institutional abuse. While they understand that institutional abuse comprises different forms of abuse, most of them are not familiar with the specific symptoms or effects of institutional abuse. Very few of them have been trained specifically to recognise or deal with the effects of institutional abuse. Less than one quarter of the research participants had encountered survivors of institutional abuse in their professional capacity. In most cases, they referred the person to someone they believed had more knowledge and expertise in this area.

Most of the research participants regarded their knowledge of institutional abuse as fair to good. However, in spite of their interest in the topic and their concern for survivors, a large majority of them admitted that they did not have any in-depth knowledge of the specific symptoms or effects of institutional abuse that would be different to the signs of abuse generally. Most of the research participants were reluctant to identify any specific signs of institutional abuse because of ‘the danger of putting people into boxes’ if they only look for specific signs and ignore people who don’t show these signs. Most of the participants felt that any disclosures from survivors must be preceded by a trustworthy relationship. More than half of the research participants believe that any form of probing of people who may or may not be survivors of institutional abuse to be inappropriate and potentially dangerous. They believed that it might lead some of these people to withdraw from services they need or add to their frustration if they discover they are not entitled to assistance even if they were abused in an institution. Others might qualify for assistance but they may not want or need the services offered by Caranua. Most of the research participants believe that it is very important the client drives the conversation. The majority feel it is very important that the services know what services Caranua is offering and that Caranua follow through on their promise of assistance.

The media is perceived to be a valuable source of information for these professionals and sometimes a catalyst for disclosures. Most of the research participants said they got their information on institutional abuse from the media and a variety of public sources: TV documentaries (e.g., States of Fear), tribunal reports (e.g., Ryan Report), books (e.g., Suffer Little Children) and word of mouth. It is clear to most of them that the media emphasis on sexual abuse was not correct, but otherwise they generally believed that the media has fulfilled an important role in promoting a national conversation. However, some respondents believe that the impact of the media is relatively transient because Irish society is not ready to accept the reality of ongoing trauma experienced by survivors. Most of the participants believe that their services are not responding very well to the needs of survivors of institutional abuse for a variety of reasons, and especially budgetary cuts leading to a reduction in services and less opportunities for training. Most of the participants believe that training on institutional abuse would be beneficial for frontline staff, especially those who are most likely to be working with survivors of institutional abuse.

## **2. The Approach and Methodology Used by Other Issue-Based Organisations to Increase Sensitivity, Awareness and Capacity.**

A number of organisations operating in Ireland have developed training that is designed to raise awareness and capacity for social care professionals e.g., Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and Women's Aid. Both have designed and delivered training modules on the general area of abuse to a variety of organisations upon request. They do not however provide specific training on institutional abuse, although they would be willing to consider such a venture with Caranua. Conversely, a UK based organisation (ICAP) provides specialist training to professionals working with survivors of institutional abuse. A number of organisations have also published good practice guidelines on how to deal sensitively with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Schachter et al., 2009). ICAP is perhaps the most suitable of potential partners for Caranua. They have proven experience and expertise in working with survivors of institutional abuse, and their Toolkit of sensitive practice for practitioners working with survivors of institutional childhood abuse (Moore et al., 2014 (forthcoming)) is highly relevant to Caranua's remit. Their current offering of a two-day training course is, however, likely to be problematic for many public service providers because of the difficulty many of them will face in getting two days off for

a training course. Consequently, a variety of courses by the three agencies identified above would offer potential participants a greater choice, particularly if the suggestions of this study on training are taken on board e.g., multiple locations, a variety of courses designed for different professional groups, one and two day courses etc.

## **Recommendations**

The research suggests that there is a significant gap in awareness and understanding of institutional abuse in Ireland amongst a range of public healthcare workers. The following recommendations are made to promote discussion on how best Caranua could address this situation. First, Caranua should consider funding accredited courses in third level institutions, which currently educate health and social care professionals. The courses would need to be widely advertised to healthcare professionals and those intending to pursue a career in this area, so that they can generate interest and demand for the course. It would help if the practitioners' professional bodies validated the course as part of their CPD activities and lifelong learning, which is the responsibility of all healthcare professionals.

Second, a range of CPD accredited courses, provided by some of the specialist organisations identified in this report, should also be run in tandem to the college-based courses to serve the needs of healthcare professionals who have already qualified but who continue to engage in CPD activities. It is important that these courses are run in different parts of the country and not just Dublin. Caranua should monitor and evaluate the impact of the measures identified above in raising awareness and understanding of institutional abuse. Third, Caranua should engage in a public awareness campaign that would seek to raise the profile of Caranua and the issue of institutional abuse. Fourth, Caranua should follow-up with the specialist organisations identified in chapter three of this report to learn from their experience in working with healthcare professionals and raising their awareness of institutional abuse.