

## **Victim survivor of sexual assault (name withheld)**

I was raped as a 17 year old girl more than 25 years ago. It was brutal and it was painful. I did not tell a soul for decades and still only a handful of people in my life now know. That was the only way I could regain control over the scenario. The thing that has kept me together is the fact I kept it secret, because that's the only thing that let me maintain control. I felt that if I let the story out, then I would be out on my own, totally exposed. I felt like this even if it was only one person who I told.

I approached the Victoria Police SOCIT Team in December 2019 to disclose my historical rape after finding courage from who knows where. It was the first time in my life I had spoken about the incident in all its hideous and revolting detail.

It was a confronting and life altering experience but the Detective Sergeant who interviewed me was exceptionally well trained, emotionally intelligent and incredibly aware of how to carefully pose questions necessary to the process. She did not wince at my words. It was overwhelmingly trauma inducing but I felt safe enough and her colleague wrote down detailed notes, almost verbatim.

I was told by the Detective Sergeant that I would never need to regurgitate my story again as the detailed notes would be created into a statement, if I wanted to go ahead and take the next step. If I decided to do this, I would just need to go into the station to sign what I had said.

What followed that initial disclosure should not have happened and is the reason why I withdrew from the process.

A month or so later when I returned to the station, I was taken into a room by a 'new' Constable and was asked casually and without warning to recount my rape again but with even more detail. She sat me down and the notes of what I had said previously were casually laid out on the table. They were just spilled out on the table like it was nothing; like a recipe book. I was horrified that my words were so casually displayed and wondered who else had seen them. I was mortified, felt sick to the stomach and fled the station after mumbling something about this not being what I expected. I was re-traumatised beyond comprehension. I did finally summon up the courage to make a complaint or rather I gave suggested feedback to the Victoria Police in October 2020, almost a year later about my treatment within the system but I never received a reply. I then berated myself for approaching Victoria Police at all, for letting my guard down, for being foolish, for letting the secret out of my control. I vowed to never speak of the assault again.

Moving forward however and due to the recent stirrings within the media regarding historical assaults, Rape Culture and the sexualised misogynistic environment that is our current Parliament, many more victims were bravely stepping forward, as they felt perhaps the winds of change were coming. This concerned me greatly. Inasmuch as I would support a victim coming forward, I could not escape the sickening feeling that another victim or victims could go through what I had gone through and be re-traumatised the way I was. I felt compelled to speak up as I felt strongly the Criminal Justice System must improve and/or must change.

So I did. I anonymously contacted a radio program and was interviewed about my experience.

I do understand intellectually the Criminal Justice System is a blunt instrument. It is also true in my judgment, to quote Victoria Police 'most people have a limited understanding of the police investigation and the broader criminal justice processes', myself included.

Therefore, due to the layperson's lack of understanding surrounding the processes, surely it is incumbent upon Victoria Police to ensure a stringent system or process is in place when a victim chooses to take the brave step of coming forward?

Something has to change. Being raped is traumatic enough but to actually speak of the crime in its minute detail is harrowing and then to throw in a cavalier system on top of that, it just takes the experience to beyond harrowing and for that I cannot find a word. All this occurred without my even getting anywhere close to a Committal Hearing not to mention a mere signed written statement.

Unfortunately in my case, the failure of Victoria Police to adequately inform me of the aforementioned 'blunt instrument' that is the Criminal Justice System and its failure to ensure I felt safe and respected within the system, meant I felt I had no choice but to withdraw from the process and so I have. I thought and still think, if this is what is to occur at the initial stages, then what on earth am I going to have to confront down the track?

I am brave but not brave enough.

After my story was discussed anonymously on the radio and the program contacted Victoria Police for comment, Victoria Police contacted me and apologised for what I experienced and told me frankly 'it should not have happened'. As a result, the SOCIT members will now be instructed to adhere to a 'gold standard' to ensure victims coming forward will be provided with continuity of care and not experience the failure of the system as I did. This action and service improvement is a direct result of my October 2020 letter and my story being discussed on the radio.

Something has to change for the victims coming forward. I would never want to discourage somebody from stepping forward, I couldn't take that responsibility, but something needs to change within the system so it can be absolutely relied on. It must be a case of knowing exactly what you are getting when you go to the police. It is terrifying – absolutely terrifying – telling your story. The cost of doing so should not be so great.