

## Claims management difficult but respectful treatment the expectation



**Trevor Haskell**  
*Deputy President  
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The varied and unpredictable nature of police work is what draws many to sign up for the job in the first place. But policing comes with the potential for high emotional impact. And, as time goes by, police accumulate events which have, in some cases, had exactly that kind of impact on them.

In my early days in the job, the number of SIDS deaths was high. Some of my contemporaries and I recently recalled the hyper-vigilant approach we took to our own children when they were babies:

we would wake in the middle of the night to check on them.

Incidents such as SIDS deaths impact on the subconscious. When part of the norm is seeing the pain of children, and of death, and just dealing with the negative side of life, there comes an impact on the copper's view of the world.

In recent months, I have seen positive responses to sessions on emotional survival for police. These sessions – run through the Leadership Faculty at Fort Largs – promote thought and discussion on the impact the job has on officers' views of the world. They also show that, with awareness of the potential impacts, coppers can maximize their positive police experience.

The introduction of such training is evidence of SAPOL's interest in its staff. The role of the Employee Assistance Section, which includes my area of Welfare, is part of the services which have been provided for many years.

Commissioner Mal Hyde added to these services a few years ago when he provided funding for early psychological intervention with external providers to assist staff deal with the impact of things in and around policing.

All police will suffer in the course of their work. The impact of some events will sneak through the best of emotional defences. This might result from a major event which, even in police work, is out of the ordinary; the cumulative impact of too many deaths; too many screaming, negative customers; or simply overload.

A crucial factor in survivability in policing is the feeling of support, from mates, colleagues, supervisors, managers and systems within SAPOL. They all have a critical impact on cops' emotional wellbeing. I find most managers and supervisors genuine and supportive in their efforts to assist those who are not travelling well.

Employee Assistance Section (Welfare, Chaplaincy, Psychology and Medical) is SAPOL's formal support service. But it is secondary to the role which primary supports play in the local workplace. Interaction with colleagues, supervisors and managers can determine whether a nasty workplace event becomes a potential breakdown point.

Employee Assistance Section is not the only area which actively supports police officers. HR-Personnel provides support in a number of ways, from organizing transfers and promotions to facilitating discussions about career options.

The workers in HR-Personnel are supported by policies and practice guidelines designed to give planning assistance and predictability. I don't agree with all the policies (country tenure) or all the decisions, but within the policies are grievance mechanisms.

I don't get excited when I disagree with a decision, but I do when the worker reports that he or she was spoken to rudely, demeaned or in some other way treated disrespectfully.

As someone who interacts with HR-Personnel almost daily, I can say that its staff do treat people with respect. That doesn't mean the decision is agreed upon, but at least the person was treated well; or, if there was a foot-in-mouth moment, it was dealt with.

The physical demands and psychological challenges of operational police work are bound to bring workers compensation claims. The preventions manager and co-ordinators of the Health Safety and Welfare Branch do a fantastic job trying to minimize the numbers of injuries, and the stats show improvements.

The branch works in concert with the SEG, managers, supervisors and workers by identifying risks and hazards and responding to them, hopefully before harm is done.

Another critical support area is Injury Management. The support of a competent rehabilitation co-ordinator and claims manager, after an injury has occurred, should minimize the cost of the claim from both a financial and psychological perspective.

*Continued page 54*

# Reduce police complaints with education, psychological profiling



**Sarah Bolt**  
Chair  
Police Complaints Authority

The adage that education is the key to all things cannot be overstated. While I have never served in the police force, I am firmly of the opinion that effective education and training can greatly reduce the number of police complaints related to allegations of unprofessional and unlawful conduct.

Policing in today's society comes with complexities. The Police Complaints Authority receives around 1,000 complaints a year against police officers. The greatest number of these involves community policing functions.

Complaints received by the PCA are broken down

into 26 categories, four of which – demeanour, failure to perform duty, use of physical measure, and traffic matters – overwhelmingly outnumber the others.

Of the 1,087 complaints received in the 2008-09 reporting period, 291 related to demeanour; 292 related to failure to perform duty; 133 related to traffic matters; and 110 related to use of physical measures.

Each category is broken up into a number of subcategories. For example, of the 291 complaints of demeanour, 259 related specifically to attitude and/or manner. Of the 110 complaints of use of physical measure, 66 related to assault and 33 to manhandling.

Why is it that these four areas attract the greatest number of complaints? And, more important, how can we reduce the number of complaints in these categories?

The short answer lies in the recruitment process, psychological profiling of potential recruits, and

continuing education and training of all officers regardless of rank or years of service.

A common thread in complaints concerns the manner in which police officers respond to a particular person or persons and/or situation.

No matter how we look at the complexities of policing functions, we must not lose sight of the fact that police are there to serve and protect the community.

The SAPOL mission statement – “Working together to reassure and protect the community from crime and disorder” – is qualified thus:

*To achieve this, SAPOL aims to be held in the highest regard as a modern, motivated, progressive and professional organization, responsive to the community's needs and expectations.*

Reference to the community's needs and expectation clearly suggests that the enforcement of the law is not always about rigidly following the objective script of some text book, general order or regulation.

Members of the police force constantly deal with the subjective, the human and emotional elements that are part and parcel of a particular circumstance or situation.

Sufficient and appropriate training and education must be provided to police officers to equip them to handle the extraordinary and, at times, unpredictable subjective nature of human behaviour. Indeed, the number of complaints received about an officer's attitude, manner and demeanour clearly

highlights the need for training in the subjective and human elements of policing.

Racism and mental illness are becoming more visible and increasingly complex in community life, and require police officers to exercise a heightened level of tolerance, sensitivity and understanding.

There can be no doubt that racism is, at times, at the heart of antisocial behaviour across Australia.

Racism is not straightforward; and it exists in many forms: community against community, conflicting cultures between people who come from the same country or origin. Racism manifests itself through bigotry, intolerance and hatred toward people of a different race, colour, religion or culture.

We must not lose sight of the fact that many of Australia's humanitarian entrants have suffered varying degrees of torture and trauma and have learned through experience that the police force and people in uniforms are to be feared.

Many new arrivals, particularly humanitarian entrants, speak little or no English, highlighting the need for, and availability of, interpreting services.

When dealing with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, police officers should be aware of the need to have, and to exercise, a degree of cultural understanding.

*Continued page 54*

From page 30

Claims management is a difficult area, as any rejection of a claim, or part of a claim, creates the potential for great negativity. This type of work requires great interpersonal skills.

Consecutive governments have seen workers compensation as too costly

and have modified the scheme a number of times to save money. This is understandable, but the challenge is to save money without destroying people.

From my position at the Police Association boardroom table, I see that workers compensation claims come with the most negative impact. This, in terms of client numbers, is the association's biggest legal

issue. It is our greatest source of complaints.

I have no doubt as to the competency of the workers in Injury Management. They have in the past operated without complaints. Something appears to have changed.

Any association member who comes up against negativity should report it to association staff, who are working with

clients to get matters properly assessed. The problem with this is that, in too many cases, the lawyers are involved.

If, in any case, members are treated disrespectfully, they should consider the code of conduct – the Commissioner requires respectful treatment of them.

From page 31

Failure to ensure that a person understands his or her rights and responsibilities and why he or she is the subject of police action is not only a possible breach of human rights, but might also form the basis of a complaint which, if substantiated, can have negative consequences upon an officer's current or future career opportunities.

Mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse are growing areas of concern in today's society.

Many people who suffer from such afflictions or addictions find themselves, often unwittingly, on the wrong side of the law. Indeed, this is an area in which police officers might find themselves at the receiving end of a complaint.

Some would argue that the size of the problem is reflected in the fact that prisons are becoming quasi mental-health institutions. The increasing number of people who, living on the streets, have mental-health, drug and alcohol problems has without a doubt impacted on the

volume of police work.

Situations fuelled by drugs, mental illness, alcohol, communication and language barriers have the potential to turn hostile through fear, misunderstanding or ignorance. There is no argument to the fact that the police are often faced with critical situations that need to be addressed and defused.

But are police officers trained to deal with subjective aspects of policing?

Nobody expects police officers to be trained as social or mental-health workers. But I would suggest that there is an expectation that they are trained to deal with highly emotive situations in a fair, calm and professional manner.

There is no denying that it is a big ask to rise above antisocial, confronting, intimidating behaviour, where buttons can be pushed and prejudices and anger ignited. But the more training a person has in dealing with complex and sensitive situations, the greater the likelihood of the matter being dealt with safely and appropriately.

Many police officers find themselves in the position of dealing with nasty situations in which emotions are stretched and tested. Of concern is the large number of allegations of offensive language, poor demeanour and offensive attitude in low-pressure non-complex situations received by the PCA.

Without a doubt, there are certain members of the public whose language skills are limited and often laced with a constant stream of expletives. But this does not excuse police officers from engaging in gratuitous foul language, as if to match that which is being directed at them in the course of their duty.

A constant stream of verbal threats and abuse is unquestionably tiring and insulting. How an officer chooses to engage or respond to such behaviour can be the difference between a substantiated complaint or otherwise.

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