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The Online Men's Behaviour Change Program – Truth and Fiction

Synopsis

The Online Men's Behaviour Change Program (OMBCP) developed and trialled by Violence Free Families (VFF) in the period 2014 – 2016 takes the more familiar face to face men's psycho-educational behaviour change program and delivers it online to groups of men with a history of family violence.

The motivation for developing the program was to provide help for families that cannot access face to face programs, such as those in regional and rural locations, shift workers and men who are too ashamed to attend face to face groups.

The OMBCP was developed by a consortium of expert organisations under contract to Violence Free Families and the opportunity was taken to upgrade and enhance critical aspects of the face to face model. Four trials have now been run, all of them evaluated intensively by the University of Melbourne. The results have been excellent, indicating that online delivery is at least as safe and effective as face to face delivery.

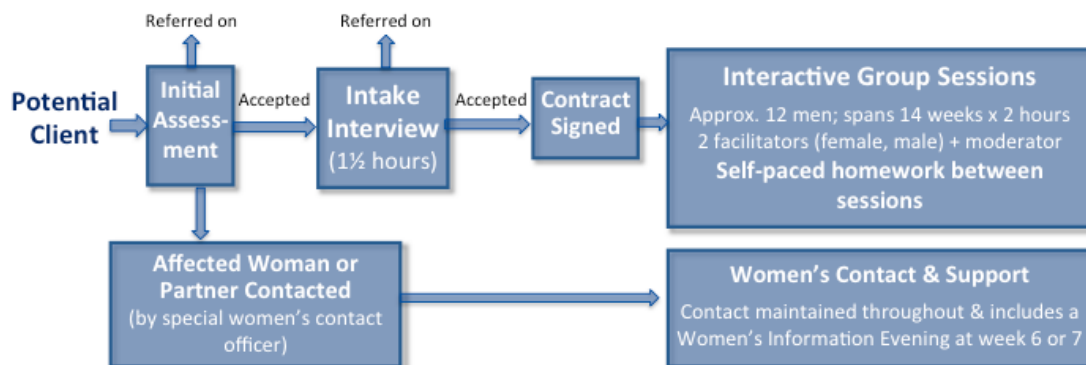
This is a world-first initiative that should have been widely welcomed, but unfortunately it has attracted uninformed opposition. This is blocking the provision of this program to a community that is crying out for it.

This paper attempts to set the record straight.

1. Principles and Structure of the OMBCP

The OMBCP is designed to improve the safety and welfare of children and women affected by male violence by engaging the men in interactive groups to change their attitudes and behaviour.

It uses a similar 'curriculum' to the face-to-face men's behaviour change programs that have been provided for many years, and brings men together online in groups of up to about 12, for two hours each week over 14 weeks. Two trained facilitators (male and female) guide the clients and a 'moderator' assists the facilitators and deals with any technical problems. The group interaction between clients is an essential and effective part of the program. There is a dedicated Women's Contact Officer who makes proactive contact with women from the time of initial contact by a man. The diagram illustrates the program further.



2. Concept Development

VFF conducted a lengthy concept development process before embarking on the creation of the OMBCP, discussing the possibility with a number of MBCP sector professionals and managers. This process revealed strongly polarised opinions, for and against. After probing arguments on both sides, VFF concluded that the arguments against the concept were not convincing and took a carefully considered decision to proceed, albeit with additional safeguards for the safety of women and children in case its judgement proved wrong.

The main beliefs advanced by those against the concept was that the program would (1) be unsafe for women, primarily because of the loss of body language contact with men and (2) the risk that men would take out emotions raised during the program on women who would be immediately accessible in the home.

The trials have shown that these concerns have not been borne out in fact, as stated by The University of Melbourne:

“Before and during the trials, concerns were expressed for the safety of the men’s partners and/or children. These concerns were not realized however, and no safety issues were identified by any partner, participant or facilitator. On the contrary, all indications from the evaluation were that the safety of other people in contact with the men had improved.”

3. Evaluation Results

Four programs over the period 2014 to 2016 were intensively evaluated by the University of Melbourne and they were assessed to be at least as effective as face-to-face programs, if not better. Programs included mandated and voluntary men; rural and urban men from three States and men from indigenous and Middle Eastern backgrounds.

No unusual safety issues were identified by any stakeholder and there is no evidence to believe that safety levels will differ from those of a face-to-face program; indeed online delivery may prove to be better.

4. The Men’s Behaviour Change Program Sector in Victoria

Approximately 30 face to face MBCPs are provided in Victoria by a range of social welfare organisations. A ‘peak body’ called No To Violence (NTV), governed by a self-appointed committee, mainly drawn from sector employees, promulgates a set of ‘Minimum Standards’ for MBCPs .

This body also controls the training and accreditation of facilitators, and potential client referrals through its Men’s Referral Service.

5. The NTV “Position Statement” on the OMBCP

NTV has consistently opposed the development, trials and acceptance of the OMBCP. Its opposition ignores the evaluation results and appears to be based on a lack of understanding of the nature and operation of the program.

As reported by the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 13 January 2018 (Tran, 2018), NTV has been instrumental in blocking funding and referrals to the program, to the great detriment of families affected by violence. Since the ABC article, it has published a “Position Statement” on its website (NTV, 2018). It concludes by “recommending that current online interventions not be used as a substitute for in-person MBCP due to a number of programmatic, delivery and safety concerns and should instead only be used to complement in-person MBCP”. This conclusion would completely negate the value of the OMBCP by preventing the people for whom it was designed from accessing it. It has been reached without a proper understanding of how the program works, without discussion with the members of their own organisation who designed and delivered the program or the University that evaluated it.

Unfortunately, NTV's conduct leaves the children and women throughout the community who could be helped by this highly effective program, at risk.

The attachment examines the NTV Position Statement in more detail.

NTV has also stated in correspondence to VFF (2015), to the ABC (Tran, 2018) and in a Letter to Members of 18 January 2018 that the program is unsafe for women and that face to face programs represent 'best practice'. An Open Letter from VFF to NTV dated 19 February 2018 requesting evidence to support these claims remains unanswered.

6. Conclusion

The OMBCP is a world-first program with great potential. VFF has engaged the services of industry leading professionals and invested in excess of \$600,000 of charitable funds to design, develop and trial the program and one of Australia's leading Universities has independently evaluated the program, with excellent results.

The NTV position in opposing this innovation is indefensible. It is based on false assumptions about the nature of the OMBCP, fallacious speculation, evidence-contradicting assertions and irrelevant studies.

It ignores the simple fact that an online men's behaviour change program has been done, and done very successfully. The program works and it can reform lives and make homes safer for women and children.

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References

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**Analysis of NTV “Position Statement on online programs for men who use family violence”
dated 27 February 2018**

NTV Statement Contents (by subheading and paragraph number)	Analysis
<p>Introduction to MBCP</p> <p>This section re-states the principles and theoretical basis of MBCPs.</p>	<p>The OMBCP uses this basis.</p>
<p>Fundamentals of MBCP</p> <p>Contains a list of ‘fundamentals’.</p>	<p>The OMBCP includes all of the fundamentals listed and addresses some of them in much greater depth than is required by the NTV Minimum Standards for MBCPs.</p>
<p>Translation from ‘In-Person’ to “Online’</p> <p>Para 1</p> <p>This paragraph asserts that “a number of proposals have been made to translate traditional in-person MBCPs to an online space” and claims that “these proposals have been made on the same basis that both multiple counselling interventions and education platforms have started to explore online delivery”.</p>	<p>It is incorrect to assert that more than one online proposal has been made. There is only one, and that is the VFF OMBCP. Therefore, the Position Statement refers only to the OMBCP.</p> <p>Drawing a parallel between the OMBCP and online education platforms is misleading. Educational programs are generally self-paced individual activities or teacher-to-class broadcasts whereas the OMBCP is a fully-facilitated online interactive group with quite different clients and dynamics.</p>
<p>Para 2</p> <p>NTV claims that “there is minimal research on the use of online male family violence interventions within the Australian context”.</p> <p>This paragraph continues by citing a study on the completion rates of university students doing fully online degrees (46.6%) (Stone, 2017) to infer that the completion rates of the OMBCP will be poor.</p> <p>The third point in this paragraph cites an article (Yu and Hu, 2016) about quality control in education programs, the inference apparently being that the OMBCP has poor quality assurance.</p>	<p>The claim that there is minimal research is without foundation. NTV is fully aware that The University of Melbourne’s Centre for Program Evaluation has comprehensively evaluated all four programs.</p> <p>The trials of the OMBCP resulted in a completion rate of approximately 90%. The only failures to complete were due to ‘force majeure’ (heart attack, death in close family, etc).</p> <p>The OMBCP rate is also better than face to face programs, which have typical completion rates in the range 50% to 75%. There are so many dissimilarities between immature students completing a 3 year degree and mature clients doing a 14 week OMBCP – many of whom are court ordered – that the comparison is quite misleading.</p> <p>The inclusion of this point again shows a complete lack of understanding of the OMBCP. One of its strengths is that quality assurance is embedded in the written and digital program materials. While still allowing flexibility to deal with emerging issues, the framework cannot be departed from by maverick facilitators, as sometimes happens in face to face programs.</p>

	In addition, management can observe programs in progress ethically but quite unobtrusively, unlike face to face programs where the physical presence of a manager could affect the dynamics of the group.
<p>Para 4</p> <p>NTV states: “While there are currently no online MBCPs accredited by No to Violence,”</p> <p>The rest of this paragraph and paragraph 5 is irrelevant to the OMBCP.</p>	<p>There is no accreditation process for MBCPs in Victoria.</p> <p>NTV’s own Minimum Standard no. 1 for MBCPs states: “Responsibility for implementation of NTV’s Minimum Standards rests with the governance body of the lead provider.” (NTV, undated, about 2005).</p> <p>In a letter to members, dated 18 January, 2018, the CEO of NTV correctly states: “No to Violence (NTV) does not accredit Men’s Behaviour Change Programs (MBCPs)”.</p> <p>So why is NTV yet again claiming the right to accredit MBCPs in their Statement?</p>
<p>Para 6</p> <p>This paragraph returns to the theme of dropout rates and cites further studies (Waller & Gilboy, 2009; Hilvert-Bruce, 2012).</p>	Again, these articles are of no relevance and the evidence of the OMBCP trials is given above.
<p>Key Practice Considerations</p> <p>Paras 1, 2</p> <p>“Principles of MBCP practice revolve around the accountability of participants, meaningful engagement with program content, risk assessment and management, pro-social peer support, the modelling of respectful relationships between male and female facilitators, and the motivation of clients towards respectful relationship choices, beliefs, and behaviours. It is, as yet, unclear how these principles might be translated to an online setting”.</p>	<p>The OMBCP is based on these principles. To say that it is unclear how they might be translated into an online setting ignores the fact that it has already been done, and done very successfully.</p> <p>To make this statement without taking the time to explore the success of the trials with those who delivered the program and/or the University of Melbourne is indefensible.</p>
<p>Para 3</p> <p>“There is risk with online programs utilising a videoconference format that the conference could be terminated by participants instantaneously, having only superficially engaged with the program content.”</p> <p>“It is also probable that online group programs will occur in the home where participants are in close proximity to a partner and/or children, this places them at significantly greater risk of re-traumatisation. Participants may also censor themselves if family members are close by and thus not meaningfully engage with program content”.</p>	<p>The OMBCP is not a videoconferencing program. However, there are robust measures in place to deal with any dropouts and the rare short-notice dropouts during the trials were due to telecommunications failures.</p> <p>This second statement is pure speculation and the evidence from the first four programs is to the contrary. Quite a few clients reported reviewing program session content with their partners after the end of sessions, often using the ‘homework’ book as a guide and reported that this helped to improve their communication and relationship.</p> <p>Clients of the program are required to have a private space as a precondition for acceptance, and no problems have been encountered in this regard.</p>

<p>Para 4</p> <p>“The particular videoconferencing software, quality of webcam, microphone and internet connection also need to be considered. All these pieces of technology effect (sic) the facilitators’ ability to assess participant engagement, manage risk, and hold participants to account. Any proposals of a text based MBCP where video and audio technologies were absent would be entirely inappropriate as there would be no way for facilitators to know who was typing, nor any way for them to know if family members were in close proximity and manage any other risks present in the situation.”</p>	<p>This is further speculation that is quite disconnected from reality.</p> <p>The OMBCP is not a videoconference; the technology has been adequate for all of the purposes listed and internal procedures including the routine use of webcams ensure that the risk of impersonation is negligible.</p>
<p>Para 5</p> <p>“Face-to-face engagements are also a key element of behaviour change work. Reading body language and non-verbal cues are essential facilitator skills and are used to assess genuine engagement and manage collusion between members of the group.”</p> <p>“Group cohesion and rapport is built between participants as they become familiar with each other and establish trust and respond to conversations and processes within the group.” (In context, the implication is that this cannot be done without face to face contact).</p>	<p>VFF was well aware of this possible objection from the concept development phase of the project. However, the outcome has been that the OMBCP has achieved high levels of engagement, higher than with face to face programs. It commences earlier in the program and through the homework. Body language was not an essential cue, as the results amply demonstrate. There are other ways of assessing what is happening with the men. Several of our facilitators were nervous about this aspect but, having now led programs, they are among its strongest advocates.</p> <p>Group cohesion and rapport develops very effectively in the online groups and the issue of collusion did not present as a significant problem. Apart from in-session facilitator observations, the evaluators remarked on the instant camaraderie in post-program focus groups, where men met face to face for the first time as if they were old friends.</p>
<p>Para 6</p> <p>“The role modelling of respectful relationships that occurs between male and female facilitators in group sessions may be difficult to replicate through webcam. The screen format may also make it difficult to manage complex group dynamics and flow of program content.</p>	<p>This is pure speculation and is contrary to the evidence.</p>
<p>Para 7</p> <p>“Finally, in considering accountability to be one of the main principles of MBCP work, part of the process of accepting responsibility involves each man acknowledging and sharing his use of family violence in a group in person. Attending an online program at home and behind a screen risks diminishing this powerful process.”</p>	<p>Again, this is evidence-free (and dangerous) speculation. The evidence is that men open up more readily with online delivery of the program, allowing facilitators to commence addressing their issues much sooner than with the face to face format, where much of the first few sessions is typically spent getting men to accept that they have a problem.</p> <p>As a consequence of this and the homework, they spend over 50% more time on addressing their problems and this may be a factor in the increased program effectiveness observed in the evaluations.</p>

Recommendations and Conclusions

NTV concludes that online interventions should ONLY be used in conjunction with face to face programs.

This conclusion has been reached on the basis of irrelevant research, baseless speculation and a poor understanding of the nature of the OMBCP, as detailed above.

If accepted, it would negate the key objective of online delivery, that is, to reach the many families whose men cannot or will not access to face to face programs. They would continue to suffer.