

Best practice policy example from Austria: multi-disciplinary victim protection teams in health care settings

Since 2011 there is an Austrian federal law to provide victim protection groups in health care systems which translates as ‘Federal law for the implementation of victims of gender based violence in public health care systems.’¹ According to this law health care systems need to provide victim protection teams for children and adults. One of the key components is to recognize early domestic violence and suspicion of violence in order to strengthen sensitization of the staff on the issue of domestic violence. Women’s groups lobbied for this law based on the success shown by child protection groups that are legally mandated in Austria.

The victim protection teams must have two representatives of medical services who are specialists in trauma surgery as well as gynaecology and obstetrics. In addition, members of the nursing service and the persons responsible for psychological and psychotherapeutic treatment in the hospital must belong to the victim protection groups.

This law has been an important improvement for the support of victim protection in health care systems. It has facilitated linkages between the entire staff, medical as well as nursing, and improved the support of victims of gender-based violence.

With this legal framework for health care systems, Austria follows the Council of Europe Convention on preventing violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) that states, according to Article 15²:

- (1)** The contracting parties create and offer on suitable trainings and educational measures for prevention and detection of violence, gender equality, the needs and legal rights of victims and prevention of secondary victimisation. This trainings and educational measures are for **the members of occupational groups**, who are working with victims or perpetrators all within its scope of acts of violence.

How the law came into effect...

For more than 10 years the Austrian Women’s Shelter Network (AÖF) has focused on the support for victims of violence in health care systems. In 2006 AÖF authored the report “Violence against women and the impacts on health’ and in 2009 the network contributed along with more than 60 specialists of health care and victim protection to the development

¹ Bundesgesetz über Krankenanstalten und Kuranstalten, BGBl. I Nr.61/2010/ KAKuG 2010
Federal Law for the implementation of victims of gender based violence in public health care systems.

² <http://www.conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/210.htm>

of a guideline for hospitals and medical practices concerning women who have suffered violence (German).³ AÖF also organized together with a forensic doctor from the medical university a lecture series entitled “one of five” targeting violence and health in the intimate social environment. There has also been a close cooperation with a network of hospitals of the “Barmherzige Brüder” in Austria, including a traveling exhibition “behind the facade” and a training movie ‘Schrittweise Ways out of violence. Episode III. Health care for women who have suffered violence.’ It is available on the AÖF website www.a oef.at (in German) or on YouTube. This was produced for doctors and nursing staff regarding how to provide support to female patients who have suffered violence. These sensitisation activities helped to create a network of professionals who supported the passing of the law. The law was based on the successful child protection groups that are in place throughout Austria.

Current limitations...

Approximately 10% of the 279 hospitals in Austria have established victim protection groups to date. The main problem with regards to implementation is the lack of financing, as over half of the hospitals are financed from public funds. There is a close cooperation with all of the hospitals that have established the victim protection groups in the largest cities of Austria. Women’s shelters can now send women unaccompanied to many hospitals knowing they will get the adequate and right support. Also the cooperation with the police and the health care system has improved since the development of victim protection groups.

With support from the EU-project IMPLEMENT another hospital in the south of Vienna is now establishing a victim protection groups. The network AÖF also coordinates the campaign GewaltFREI leben (living free from violence). This is a campaign for prevention of violence against women and includes a manual for the establishment of victim protection groups. The manual includes common quality standards, but especially asks the management of hospitals to support the members of victim protections groups at their daily work. See www.gewaltfreileben.at

Future work needed in Austria to strengthen the victim protection groups:

- Institutional cooperation between the medical and nursing sector, victim protection, women’s shelter, police and registered doctors be further strengthened.
- The financial resources for victim protection be secured.
- Guidelines and standards regarding systematic implementation should be developed throughout Austria.

Through the IMPLEMENT project we would like **to assist other Member States to implement victim protection groups in health settings**. For additional information about the Austrian best practice, please contact the Director of the Austrian Women’s Shelter Network, Maria Rösslhumer: maria.roesslhumer@a oef.at

³ <http://www.bmfj.gv.at/familie/gewalt/gesundheitliche-vorsorge-gewaltbetroffener-frauen.html>