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Mobbing is an
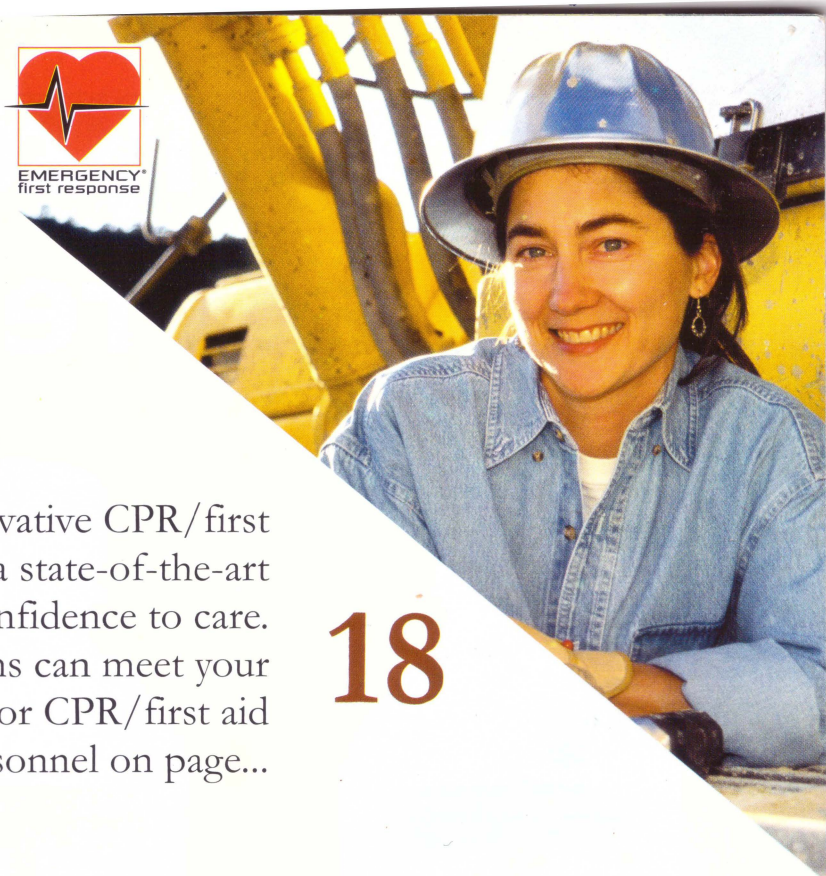# OHS issue!

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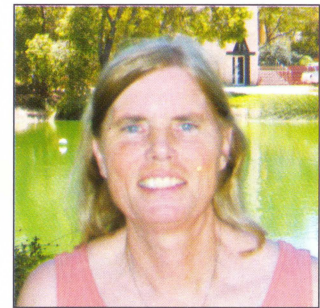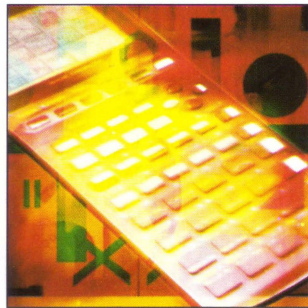WA Division
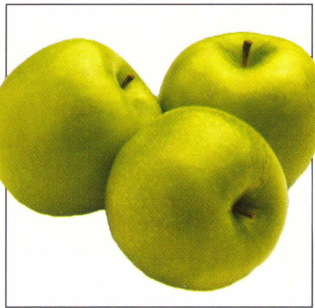
Australian Safety Matters MAGAZINE

Cover story:

"Emergency First Response is an innovative CPR/first aid training organisation using a state-of-the-art teaching methodology that creates confidence to care. Find out more about how our programs can meet your need to meet the requirements for CPR/first aid trained personnel on page...

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inside ASMm

> "…it [mobbing] has already been described as a more serious safety and health issue than any other in the workplace. Yet any acknowledgment of the problem, let alone a way to deal with it, is missing from state and federal legislation." Cheryl Edwardes on the topic of mobbing, Legislative Assembly, Wednesday, 25 August 2004, Hansard Page: 5589c - 5597a / 1.

Mobbing is an occupational health and safety issue
How are we dealing with it?

By Jaci Moore

Linda Shallcross

Queensland is at the forefront in Australia in terms of its recognition of workplace mobbing, with some guards against it woven into anti-bullying laws in 2002. **ASMm** asked Consumer and Employment Protection Minister, John Kobelke, what the WA Government's take on the matter is. His office supplied us with the following comment: "Any form of workplace bullying should not be tolerated and 'mobbing' is nothing more than group bullying, which must be eliminated.

"The Commission for Safety and Health in WA has produced clear guidelines for both employers and employees on how to identify and deal with bullying.

"Bullying can be both direct and indirect, verbal or physical and it not only undermines an individual's right to dignity at work, but also creates unhappy and less productive workplaces.

"Workplace bullying can affect safety and health of those involved and needs to be as well managed as any other hazard in the workplace."

In her address to the legislative assembly in August 2004, Cheryl Edwardes labelled the treatment of civil servant and whistleblower, Chris Read, among others, as mobbing. She said mobbing was common in WA government departments. "There is a serious malaise in the public sector today," is how she termed it.

"Having established that mobbing is an occupational safety and health issue, I draw attention to one group of employees that has already endured severe cases of workplace mobbing in Western Australia; that is, the whistleblowers to whom I have referred many times. Time and again I have raised the causes of the likes of Chris Read, Jean Thornton and Neil Winzer. Sadly, I need to report that their cases are still not being dealt with adequately or properly…

…"Until we become serious about whistleblowers, we will allow workplace mobbing to operate against whistleblowers. It is a serious issue," she said.

Tests for retaliation

One of the speakers at the Australian Inaugural National Mobbing Conference held in Brisbane during October last year, Dr Susan Moriarty, a former adviser to Queensland's Anti-Discrimination Commission and now an industrial law consultant who regularly represents public servants, said that compulsory psychiatric tests are used by state government bureaucrats to bully 'difficult' employees. She says test are being used in a retaliatory manner. Every one of her clients who was compelled to undergo a psychiatric assessment had previously made a complaint about working conditions.

To those that are victims of mobbing and bulling and to those that study the phenomena it is vexatious that research into the matter here in Australia is so limited and uptake of the issue has been slow. But, the Brisbane conference certainly showed that there is extensive interest in mobbing. Conference organiser and one of this country's rare researchers on mobbing, Linda Shallcross, told **ASMm** that the conference and papers were nothing short of awesome. She said, "we have been inundated with requests due to the huge interest in workplace mobbing which many workers can relate to."

**What is mobbing?
(Definitions)**

Workplace mobbing is defined by Ms Shallcross as a 'virus' or a 'cancer' that spreads through malicious hearsay, rumour, and gossip. It is done with deliberate intent to have those targeted 'eliminated' or 'forced out' of their employment. Accusations of unsubstantiated 'bullying' can even be made against the target as the perpetrators realise the benefits of claiming 'victim' status. Those targeted are falsely accused and are denied the right of reply, procedural fairness or natural justice.

Her research can be found on the website of the Australian Inaugural National Mobbing Conference organised by a voluntary advocacy and support

Reducing the incidences of workplace mobbing and healing its effects, require not just training but education: independent critical reflection on the human project, insight into the complexity of life, knowledge of right and wrong...

group, Black Sheep. Many of the papers quoted from in the article below are also available on the site. For those interested in the topic the url is www.workplacemobbing.com

One of the speakers at the October 2004 mobbing conference was Dr Michael Sheehan of Griffith University in Queensland. He defines mobbing as a discourse of organisational change common in globally competitive organisations.

Sheehan explains in his paper that "in general, the mobbing specific literature tends to be focussed on passive aggressive group behaviour that is used as a deliberate strategy to cause harm to another worker and with the intention of having that worker relinquish their employment. Furthermore, mobbing is represented by degrees, similar to those used to illustrate the severity of burning, that is first, second and third degree mobbing."

He warns that it is necessary to ensure common understanding of the problem and to enable understanding of criteria against which such actions may be measured. "In this way we may avoid labelling conflict that occurs as part of normal human interaction at work as mobbing. It is necessary to have such measures to avoid spurious and vexatious claims of mobbing by those seeking other goals," Dr Sheehan said.

We need to understand mobbing

As Dr Sheehan put it above, it is necessary to ensure common understanding of mobbing.

In his post-conference summary, Prof Ken Westhues said that we should be educating ourselves about humans in mobs. He says workplace mobbing springs from elemental impulses common to many mammals. "The term pecking order comes from what chickens routinely do:

gang up on one of their number (often a new arrival) each pecking the target and keeping it away from food and water. Although individual pecks do little harm, their cumulative effect is to kill the targeted bird.

"There is no quick fix for something so instinctive and primordial. Reducing the incidences of workplace mobbing and healing its effects, require not just training but education: independent critical reflection on the human project, insight into the complexity of life, knowledge of right and wrong, self-knowledge above all."

He refers to literature such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and The house of seven gables, to films such as The Crucible and Dead poet's society, to the research summaries of Swedish psychologist, Heinz Leymann, and to use your computer search engine all as means to educate yourself about mobbing.

He says this year's mobber could be next years target and that laying low and following the crowd will not guarantee that you will not become a victim of mobbing.

How to respond to workplace mobbing (solutions)

In his paper, Dr Sheehan attempts to identify some solutions to the problem of mobbing. He refers to suggestions found in existing mobbing literature such as legislative change and enabling legal redress. He says that legislators, however, have been slow to heed the call. He warns that legislative change may be needed to

encourage behavioural change but it does not always guarantee attitudinal change. "It suggests a punitive approach to addressing the problem of workplace mobbing. Such an approach tends to further a hostile environment where conflict is not dealt with constructively. It diverts the problem away from those who are probably best placed for dealing with the problem and into the hands of human resource staff, or others, who may not be equipped to deal with the problem from other than a strictly policy driven framework. Rather, the

Anyone can be a Mobbing Target
Colleagues
Bosses
Juniors
Workmates
YOU!

Mobbing – Don't join in!

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organisation as a whole needs to be aware of the problem of workplace mobbing so that it may act in an educative and preventative, rather then reactive, way."

Sheehan suggests that organisations need to "confront the perpetrators within a problem solving rather than punitive framework to address the problem. The persons identified as mobbers ought to be confronted about their behaviour. Second, those people ought to be offered an opportunity to deal with their behaviour within a framework of skill development."

He suggests that investing in prevention and impact reduction strategies makes very good business sense. He argues that the skills most likely to help deal with the problem of mobbing behaviours include communication, conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, leadership, negotiation, stress management, and team-building. "To these skills I would add the development of personal mastery

and emotional intelligence skills as a way of developing self-restraint and compassion. These skills ought to be developed within a bounded emotionality framework and within the concept of the organisation as a learning organisation."

Quoting from others Prof Ken Westhues suggests some personal actions that may be useful to avoid mobbing and responding to it: Keep your mind on the job, plan carefully before blowing the whistle, get a life away from work, show kindness to the target, distrust those in whom the impulse to punish is powerful.

Westhues says to keep a workplace free of scape-goating and terror takes more than good intentions on the part of the managers and the workers involved. Some organisational structures and procedures work better than others for getting work done well and for discouraging people from ganging up. He lists some possibilities: spread power around, minimise
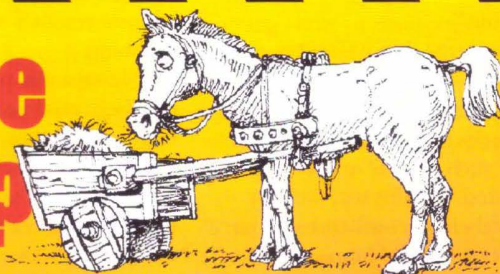
adversarial, zero sum proceedings. This he explains by saying that "quasi-judicial tribunals unleash groupthink and the impulse to scapegoat. Productivity, truth, and justice are better served through open administration and straight talk, with cards on the table."

He further suggests discouraging a culture of grievance and legalism; avoid neutral mediators, which he explains as being usually siding with whoever has the upper hand. "An effective mediator is openly committed to truth, fairness, give and take, productivity, quality, efficiency. He finally suggests we provide ample opportunity for dialogue.

Cost of mobbing

There has been some attempt to identify the costs of mobbing. Michael Sheehan put it this way in his paper: "There appears to be no reliable estimates of the costs of workplace mobbing to the individual, the organisation or society in general." He thus follows with an extrapolation

from the workplace bullying literature of the likely costs of workplace mobbing.

For the individual, he explains, mobbing has significant consequences for those who experience it directly and also those who witness it.

"Impacts on individuals include a wide range of health, psychological and financial distressors which in some cases have long-term health consequences." Those given as examples in his paper include psychological damage, post-traumatic stress disorder and an impact on an individual's relationships outside of work.

Organisational costs associated with workplace bullying have been identified. Sheehan expands: "In the United Kingdom, Hoel, Sparks and Cooper (2001) estimated that workplace bullying absenteeism contributed an extra 18 million lost working days annually. By contrast, Rayner, Hoel and Cooper (2002) argue that costs are rarely estimated reliably but rather are lost in the daily activities of those who are required to deal with the problem. As such, the true costs remain unaccounted for. In the Scandinavian countries, the need for intervention by personnel officers, personnel consultants, managers of various grades, occupational health staff, and external consultants in an endeavour to overcome the problem have been conservatively estimated at 30,000 to 100,000 US dollars (Leymann, 1990). Nevertheless, there is a lack of research quantifying the impact workplace mobbing has on organisations." The author describes a model developed by himself and colleague McCarthy, Barker, and Henderson that can estimate the financial burden of workplace bullying in organisations. Due to a lack of prevalence rates in Australia, however, it has been necessary for them to use international figures to estimate the cost to Australian organisations.

He additionally mentions a model developed to measure the costs of sexual harassment in an organisation, but stresses that there are no similar models to measure the cost of mobbing and certainly endorses the development of such a model: "The paucity of Australian research of the impact of workplace mobbing on individuals and organisations undoubtedly restricts the development of sound policy and interventions," he says.

Different types of mobbing

There are different types of mobbing. In her paper: 'mediocrity and the 'no charge' principle - a recipe for mobbing' Dr Jocelynne Scutt - until recently the Tasmanian Anti Discrimination Commissioner (she finished in the position a couple of weeks after the conference on the completion of her five year contract) talks about 'mobbing gegen chefs', a term coined for describing upward mobbing, or 'high end' or 'top end' mobbing'.

She says, "the politics of 'high end' mobbing are important to fathom, because this type of bullying is generally directed at change makers or change agents. If change agents are halted in their tracks, change will be stultified and the hopes we have for a different world, where bullying, abuse, discrimination, prejudice and bias become of historical interest only, will be stymied. The hopes we have for construction of a world where disadvantaged and dispossessed groups are elevated to equality, and the misuse and abuse of power is ended, will not be fulfilled."

Her paper (also available on the conference website) investigates how 'high end' mobbing occurs and what

The prime cry of the mobber is that he or she is being 'bullied' by the change agent. This is designed to undermine the change agent's authority and standing, because it tears at the heart of everything the change agent stands for.

elements serve to construct a mobbing environment.

This kind of "mobbing is characterised by reversing the roles of the mobbed and the mobber, the bully and the bullied. The prime cry of the mobber is that he or she is being 'bullied' by the change agent. This is designed to undermine the change agent's authority and standing, because it tears at the heart of everything the change agent stands for.

"Change agents have high energy levels. Change agents have high performance standards. This is used against the change agent, as if high energy levels and high performance standards are wrong - a fault in themselves."

This she calls ridiculous. "Lack of leadership in high-level positions leads to nonsense contentions on their part as to no responsibility extending to the target who is being mobbed, no duty of care owed to them, no right of the mobbed to natural justice or procedural fairness. Without the lack of leadership, mobbing could not occur or, if it did, could not prevail," Dr Scutt explains.

She concludes that the end result is, "the mobbed is left to deal with the mobbing and the mobbers without support from the top, from where it should come. The effects are long reaching."

A case in point

Dr Charmaine Hockley is the author of *Silent Hell* a book she wrote because she believed there was an important story to be told. She says the book is about survival, but is also about the antisocial workplace practices such as abuse, bullying, mobbing, harassment, and stalking among women-as-nurses that make up the dark side of the caring profession.

"My research showed clearly that such behaviour is widespread. Everyone knows about the disease of workplace violence, yet

nobody has been successful in proposing a cure. By writing this book, I was hoping to expose this damaging phenomenon by reducing its occurrence and making workplaces a safer and healthier environment.

This story began in nursing but it could have easily happened wherever people work," Dr Hockley said.

Violence among nurses

Silent Hell is about violence among nurses in their formalised working relationships. It examines how women-as-nurses make sense of this behaviour towards themselves and others.

In her conference paper 'Silent Hell. Workplace violence and bullying', Dr Hockley spoke of the research that gave rise to the book as well as a series of ongoing studies into violence among women in their formalised working relationships.

"It [the paper] analyses female abuse and reveals that in a hostile, unsafe, and unhealthy work environment any one can be targeted - seniority is no protection - and more often than not the employing organisation will actively support or at least condone this behaviour, in part, because it is less problematic and consequently the approved organisational goals are met."

During a PhD research project, Dr Hockley identified as an outcome of her study that healthcare selection committees did not see nurses as leaders. Consequently, female nurses found it difficult to be promoted to positions in the health care sector outside the nursing stream. She began to ask why nurses were not seen as leaders. One of the most frequent responses from other nurses was, "as nurses are promoted they do not care for nurses or nursing."

She began to explore the concept of nurses at management level 'not caring', a term that was rarely applied to 'non-nurses' at

senior management level.

Then she moved away from female nurses at management level not caring, towards female nurses at any level having antisocial workplace behaviours that caused harm to another person in the workplace. Her further research led to questions such as: "why are women-as-nurses not perceived as being violent?" and "why do women-as-nurses tolerate violence?"

Dr Hockley found that nursing is a predominately female occupation that has been traditionally male-defined in its organisational arrangements. "Why nurses continue to accept this definition is difficult to understand in contemporary society. I considered that the answer to that question was that it made their world less problematic. Therefore, the behaviour of people in organisations, and the meanings they ascribe to their behaviours and actions to make sense of them, must be taken into account when exploring violence among nurses."

The 'why' questions then turned to 'how'. "How do women-as-nurses accommodate violence?" She explained that the literature showed this perspective had not been addressed and that she had to find her own answers.

"I eventually turned to the literature on social theories because what I was researching was about human interaction and how to make sense of our behaviour whilst being constrained by the world."

She defined workplace violence as: 'Any antisocial workplace act that causes harm to another person'. The central tenets of her study were:
- women are capable of being violent towards each other;
- women use a variety of violent strategies to reach personal goals in the workplace; and
- nurses learn how to be violent to each other as a part of their

socialisation when they enter nursing.

Dr Hockley said one of the reasons why workplace violence is so difficult to define is that there are many who consider violence to be a uniquely physical act and bullying to be child like school behaviour. "At that time, concepts such as mobbing were generally unheard of and stalking only involved disgruntled husbands and movie stars. It certainly did not occur in the workplace. However, what nurses were recognising as acts of abuse were posters and emails." Dr Hockley offers the example of one manager who had a poster on her door that many staff members found intimidating, particularly when they had a problem they wished to report. The poster is as follows:

"When things go wrong,
as they usually will
And your daily road seems all uphill
When morale is low
and the works pile high,
When you try to smile but can only cry,
And you really feel you'd like to quit

Don't run to me…
I don't care a shit"

Dr Hockley comments that some may perceive this poster as humorous, however, there were some who did not. Posters were sent to me as examples of an indirect form of abuse. The most insidious part of a poster is that the nurses were not quite sure who was being targeted.

Her paper then lists some other types of antisocial workplace behaviour evidenced in her research. She talks of exclusion and alienation, maximising power and powerless relationships, fear, sabotage, guilt by association, favouritism, harassment, physical e.g. 'threatened to slap my face' or 'pushed me into the autoclave', verbal abuse, rumours/gossip, and silent perpetrators.

The paper gives an overview of how nurses survive this behaviour. "The first part of surviving is 'knowing' about this behaviour. Nurses have different ways of constructing their reality and yet come to a common

conclusion. Nurses, generally, know eventually that they are being targeted, no matter how subtle the approach may be. This process of knowing I have called the *'nursing rites of passage'.*"

She talks of three phases of acknowledging workplace violence: recognition, re-evaluation and redefinition, which are linear but in practice a nurse may enter any phase at any time and return to any of the phases before proceeding to the next.

**Phase 1: Recognition is illustrated in the following account:**

It was my first year of nursing working on a paediatric unit. I was working with an enrolled nurse who had given me a hard time since first coming to the ward. One evening my sister, who is also a nurse was relieving on the ward and was making a bed in a darkened corner of the ward. This EN spoke sharply about the way the bed was being made. She spoke rudely and then realised who it was she said it to. "Oh it's
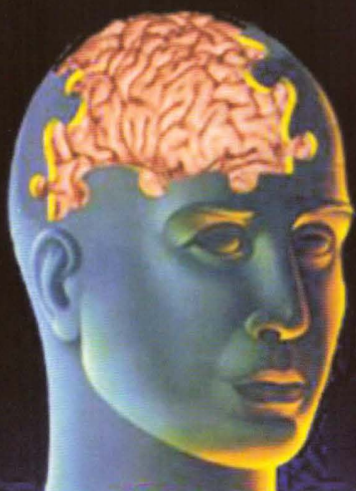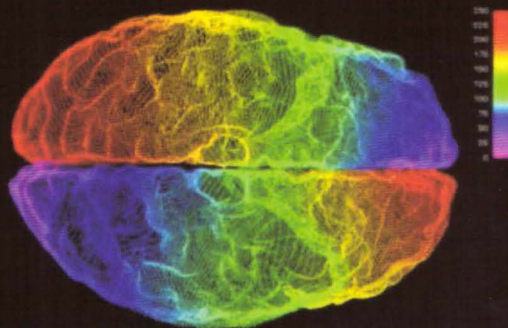
In some workplaces, there are meetings that allow staff to talk about specific issues whilst others may discourage this form of free speech. Actions individuals choose depend upon the meaning they have attached to the event or behaviour.

you. I thought you were your sister. I am sorry." I will never forget that. It was my first introduction to the 'real' world of nursing.

Phase 2: Re-evaluation of the current position is the way in which nurses are able to assess the situation in which they find themselves. Once they have re-evaluated the situation they act. Thus, while they are acknowledging the tensions and contradictions that have led up to this behaviour they are entering the next phase of action.

Phase 3: Redefinition phase which is to choose strategies that are culturally appropriate for the individual and/or the organisation. Redefining

culturally appropriate strategies depends upon the context in which individuals find themselves. For example, a particular strategy may be appropriate in one workplace but not in another. In some workplaces, there are meetings that allow staff to talk about specific issues whilst others may discourage this form of free speech. What action the individual chooses depends upon the meaning they have attached to the event or behaviour. For instance, a person who is articulate may speak out, whilst another may use other forms of communication to express their feeling. Some may even choose to be silent, which is a strategy in itself.

Dr Hockley explained that nurses in this study generally went

through a variety of stages seeking support from within and outside themselves in order to survive. She divided types of strategies into two main groups: accommodating strategies and active strategies.

Accommodating strategies
The responses suggested that nurses initially select three main strategies to accommodate violence. Firstly, they relied on themselves, such as self-awareness, or less frequently, used outside sources, such as counseling. Secondly, they considered socialising as an outlet such as going to parties, taking drugs, or abusing alcohol. The third most common strategy was leaving metaphorically. One nurse describes this approach as follows:

The Black Sheep - voluntary advocacy and support group

They do leave. They do leave or they take up the attitude that they are going to work and not get involved in anything that is going to put me in a vulnerable position. [They say] "I am not going to take on any CN work or take any promotional positions. I just want to work the shift, come to work, do my work for the patients and go home again." They do not get involved in any organisational culture. They don't get involved in nursing culture, like the ANF, the College, or whatever, so they cope by earning their money and getting out. ….

Active strategies

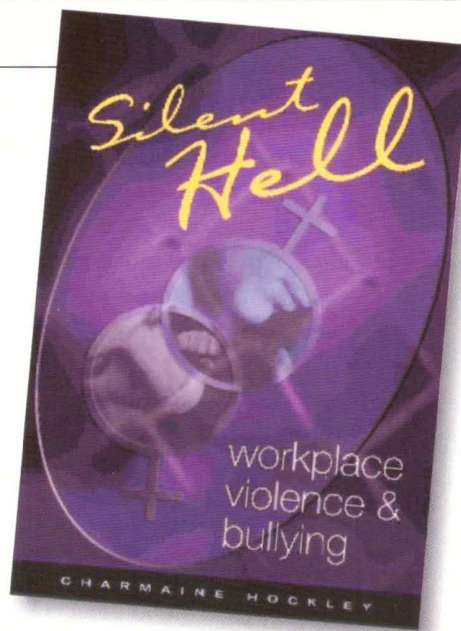Two main active strategies that nurses chose were leaving physically and to a lesser degree whistle blowing.

Leaving nursing for some was like a divorce. Some felt extreme sadness. Some grieved. To attempt to understand the depth of grieving is difficult. If a person loses a loved one in an accident, then people can relate to that and send messages of support. However, when a nurse loses her self-esteem, pride, or a goal aimed for, there is difficulty for those around the nurse to respond in a helpful manner.

Whistle blowing is not generally a strategy many nurses choose. Whistleblowers can suffer a wide range of official and unofficial reprisals that can affect them personally and professional such as experiencing ill health or loss of promotion opportunities.

There is one strategy that, interestingly enough, only one nurse offered during the study and that was revenge.

Dr Hockley's riveting conclusion revealed that many tried to encourage her not to undertake this work. She persisted and notes that one of the most difficult aspects of studying this subject matter was that some of the participants had not ever told anyone about their experiences or if they had, not for a long time. She believes that any person who has survived mobbing, bullying, stalking or

any of the various types of abuse are survivors. "Whatever strategy people use to survive it is important to recognise that one solution is not the answer for everyone and we need to offer multiple strategies to assist those who need help."

The book cover to Silent Hell: Workplace Violence and Bullying by Dr. Charmaine Hockley