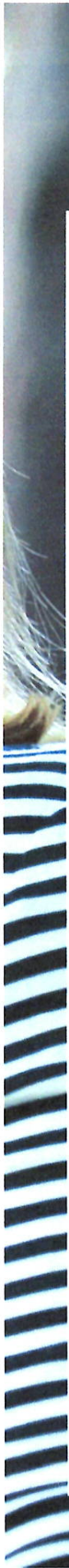


A day in the life of ...

Sue-Ellen Hills

SOLICITOR, HEALTH
JUSTICE PARTNERSHIP,
REDFERN LEGAL CENTRE

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON MCCORMACK



Sue-Ellen Hills had two daughters under four when she sat down to watch a program on community legal centres that changed her life. *Street Practice* on ABC TV in 2005 told the story of budding lawyers working in Kingsford Community Legal Centre. It was a game-changer for the Killara mother who had studied medical science and had worked in medical sales before taking a few years off to care for her young children. "I had never wanted to work in criminal or corporate law but when I saw the show about the practical help solicitors offer through community legal centres, I knew it was for me," Hills recalls. She enrolled to study law at Macquarie University via distance education and, six years on, after practical and volunteer work at the Redfern Legal Centre, she started working as a solicitor. Just over a year ago, Hills started as the solicitor in a unique partnership with Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. The Health Justice Partnership began in May 2015 as an early intervention program, designed to identify and intervene in legal issues that frequently exist for patients in hospital. The Redfern Legal Centre knew the potential for legal issues to cause or compound health problems. It is the first hospital-based legal service in NSW. About 100 people have received free legal help under the grassroots program. Hills, 45, tells **JANE SOUTHWARD** about the job she loves.

It's a strange job being a solicitor when you find yourself in the post-natal ward of a hospital holding someone's brand new baby. But I have seen quite a few mums who had been in a domestic violence relationship and had left the partner. They come to hospital to have the baby and are trying to navigate their way around parenting the child with a dad they are no longer seeing and where there is an apprehended violence order in place.

Before I studied law, I had always thought lawyers were either commercial or criminal and I didn't realise there was such an idea as community legal centres and being there with people and really helping them along that path.

Most people have no idea solicitors do this kind of practical work. A lot of what community legal centres do is access to justice and that's getting people to understand that the problem they have can have a legal remedy.

At Redfern Legal Centre, we do lots of outreach but it's special working in Royal Prince Alfred (RPA). The hospital provides me with an office but I also go and see clients at the ward. You can sit there in bed and have a solicitor come to you to help you.

We are using the fact that people tend to trust health professionals to try to increase the access to justice and to try to get people realising that their problem can be sorted out by a solicitor. I don't go to court.

The first step was to train hospital social workers and nurses to identify then refer health-harming legal needs. Domestic violence was an obvious one and is involved in about half the cases, followed by child protection issues, tenancy and family law issues. The surprising thing was that most patients didn't know their problem involved a legal issue.

Sometimes it is really, really sad. I hop in my car and drive home to everyday suburbia and realise it can be unfair but that you can help someone but not everyone. You hang onto the really good results to keep you going. Sometimes you just can't fix the problems.

I had a terrific result when I first started. An elderly Aboriginal woman who was living in

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a Housing NSW property. She needed a hand rail to walk up the stairs. An occupational therapist had written the recommendation and Housing Department had just sat on it. She had a fall and broke some bones.

I dropped in to see her and got some instructions from her. I wrote a letter to Housing Department that afternoon and three days later Housing were there putting a hand rail in. For me it was something really quick but for the client it made a big difference to her daily life. It allowed her to be discharged from hospital early. If she didn't have the hand rail, she couldn't have gone home.

Another client had some mental health issues and there was an error with a third-party debt and he had a debt collector chasing him for \$117. He was quite distressed. He came to the nursing staff and they referred him to me. I discovered there were certain things said by the debt collector that shouldn't have been said and were against the law. They threatened him, they said they would get the sheriff. You actually can't do that because there is not a court judgment on that order.

We wrote to the debt collector, explaining our client had mental health issues, and asking them to revise their processes.

A lot of vulnerable people end up with so many fines they either don't understand or have no ability to pay them back. The fines just keep accruing and go to enforcement and have money taken out of their account. Sometimes it is a lack of literacy.

People get a fine and put it in the drawer because they know they can't pay it. Nothing really happens for a while then they start getting something with red writing on it and can panic. It's about getting them to come to us

early so we can help. Sometimes the fines can be waived.

RPA was the ideal hospital for us to partner with as it is in inner-city Sydney and huge so they see all types of people and many are disadvantaged. The hospital's view of patients is multidisciplinary. It isn't just about their health. Having a solicitor here fits in with how they view patients.

In the six-month review of the Health Justice Partnership program, we found that 50 per cent of our clients had experienced domestic violence. Domestic violence leads to so many other legal issues that fall down, whether it is debt that has been transmitted across the relationship, issues with Family and Community Services about keeping their children safe, or housing issues.

In 2013, the Law and Justice Foundation released a report on the legal needs of people with illness and disability. They started to look at the social determinants of health, the where you live, the how you live, and the who you live with. It found that the more vulnerable and disadvantaged you are, the greater those type of things affect you.

Disadvantaged people often have a lot of debt, so we are talking about garnishee orders, fines for driving without a license, short-term loans, debt collectors chasing them – the stress and anxiety on people can be huge.

When it comes to the 'who you live with', we see a lot of women who are victims of domestic violence and try to help them navigate through that process. The legal part is one huge part of what they do in hospital to help people with that type of thing.

My father is an Aboriginal man raised in Redfern. I grew up in

Sutherland Shire with a middle class life. After school I went to the University of NSW and studied medical science then worked at the Prince of Wales Hospital for a while and ended up in medical sales. Then I took time off to be at home with my kids.

Ironically, my grandmother worked in the laundry at RPA back in the 50s and my dad used to run around the corridors while she was working. It's funny to be working in the building where that happened.

I feel endlessly blessed that I got to be raised in an Aboriginal family with an extended network such as endless aunties and uncles.

One of my favourite cases was helping an Aboriginal mum who had come down from Dubbo with her daughter who had leukaemia and was having chemotherapy. The mum was talking to one of the Aboriginal liaison officers at the hospital about trying to get some repairs to her house. They sent her to me.

There were mushrooms growing on the carpet, there was so much mould. The back of the shower where the taps were was a tarpaulin. She had been trying to get it fixed and nothing had been done. She had a very sick daughter and there was no way that daughter could go back to that house in Dubbo because of the mould. She was so sick and she needed to go home to be with her mum in her own bed.

We spoke to the housing office in Dubbo and last time I spoke to the mum, she was picking out colours for kitchen doors and her daughter's health was improving.

There is a tight tie between health and legal issues. She had tried to get something done but really needed that letter from the solicitor to explain the need. It was a lovely outcome. **LSJ**