

TEN YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP

Health Justice Partnership 2015–2025



INNER
MELBOURNE
COMMUNITY
LEGAL

TEN YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP

Legal issues are often at the root of someone's health, financial or social problems and they can make those problems worse.

We know, however, that people are almost twice as likely to disclose legal problems to a health and welfare professional as they are to a lawyer.

Recognising this, Health Justice Partnerships (HJPs) integrate legal assistance into healthcare settings to improve access to justice and health outcomes.

This model of integrating legal assistance within a health care setting was developed in the United States by a paediatrician at Boston Medical Centre.

Since then, the model has expanded across the world and become embedded in many health care settings around Australia.

After establishing a pioneering Health Justice Partnership with the Royal Women's Hospital in 2009, Inner Melbourne Community Legal (IMCL) approached The Royal Melbourne Hospital (RMH) to explore whether the model might be replicated.

RMH is a major trauma centre, providing a range of specialist medical, surgical and mental health services, as well as rehabilitation, aged care, specialist clinics and community programs including the Royal Park campus, a sub-acute rehabilitation site. Each year, it treats more than 350,000 inpatients and outpatients.

In late 2014, the RMH executive endorsed IMCL's proposal to commence a pilot of an on-site HJP. In October 2015, the pilot commenced and we saw our first clients.

Since then, more than 628 clients have been helped by the partnership.

ABOUT THE MODEL

Lawyers and health care professionals working together can provide collaborative support of patients/clients to ensure they can obtain appropriate and fair legal and health outcomes.

Health care professionals are better able to identify presenting psycho-social needs of their patients which so often have a legal dimension, and the way in which their health issues might be caused by or exacerbated by any legal issues.

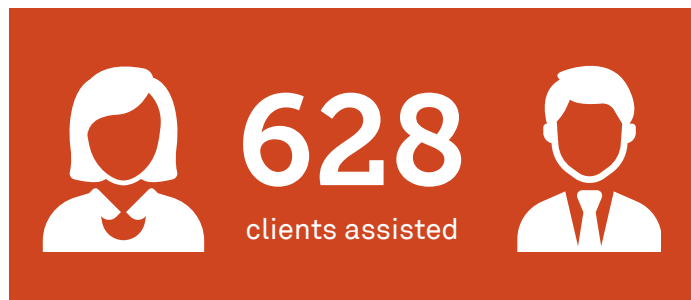


Through working in close partnership with social work teams and other health care professionals, IMCL lawyers develop skills and capacity to understand and navigate the hospital system and how to access to social supports in the community for our clients.

Linking marginalised people with a community lawyer at critical points such as during hospitalisation means they are getting the right supports to reduce stresses on their health and wellbeing. For many patients, getting access to legal support means they can have a safer discharge from hospital because issues such as precarious housing or safety in family violence situations can be addressed.

SNAPSHOT OF THE HJP

Service data*



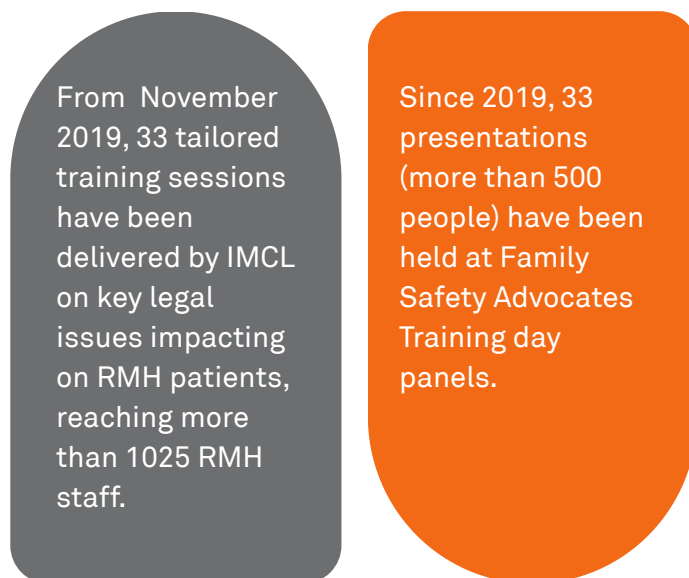
* 1 January 2015 to 31 October 2025



Client demographics



Professional legal training



HJP model

Through many years of development, IMCL has identified several key ingredients to a successful HJP:



IMPACT OF HJPs ON PATIENTS

The onsite legal clinics make it possible for people to get legal help by breaking down the barriers:

48%

WOULD NOT HAVE
OTHERWISE SEEN A
LAWYER

80+%

SAID IT WAS THE FIRST
TIME THEY HAD SEEN A
LAWYER BECAUSE
THEY COULD NOT
AFFORD IT, OR DID NOT
KNOW WHERE TO FIND
ASSISTANCE

96%

SAID THE LOCATION
WAS APPROPRIATE
FOR THEM

Legal help can alleviate health problems:

60%

SAID THEIR LEGAL
ISSUE HAD A NEGATIVE
IMPACT ON THEIR
HEALTH AND
WELLBEING*

60%

SAID DEALING WITH
LEGAL PROBLEMS
GAVE THEM AT LEAST
ONE BENEFIT IN THEIR
LIFE

60%

SHOWED SIGNS OF
REDUCED STRESS OR
ANXIETY

60%

HAD AN IMPROVED
FINANCIAL SITUATION

60%

HAD INCREASED
CAPACITY TO FOCUS
ON THEIR HEALTH OR
QUALITY OF LIFE

76%

FELT THEY WERE
BETTER ABLE TO COPE
WITH THEIR LEGAL
ISSUE AFTER SEEING A
LAWYER

* This is consistent with research which shows unsolved legal problems can have detrimental effects on an individual's health, financial and social situation. When legal issues are addressed, social workers note that patients are better able to engage with their health and treatment.

Source: RMH evaluation report 2018

EVOLUTION & HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

2017- present

IMCL joined the 'Strengthening Hospital Response to Family Violence' working group, which led to the creation of the Family Safety Team. IMCL participates in the Family Safety Training expert panel every two months, building knowledge and capacity of Melbourne Health staff identify and respond to family violence in their roles.

2018-2023

IMCL was a member of the Integrated Model of Care Steering Committee, focusing on ensuring a holistic response to patients experiencing elder abuse issues.

2018

Two positive evaluations of the partnership were released (including one multi-site evaluation across the Parkville precinct).

The partnership featured on ABC Radio's 'The Law Report'.

2019- present

We've explored how to expand the service into mental health teams including through John Cade Unit, Waratah and programs working with people experiencing homelessness and mental ill health.

2020-2021

With RMH on the front line responding during the COVID pandemic, we maintained a strong partnership and adapted the delivery of the legal service so we were able to continue to support patients despite not being present on-site. This included primarily delivering services by phone, but also adapting where necessary to meet clients with their social workers in other locations, like out the front of their homes where we needed urgent signing of documents or where clients had accessibility needs.

2022-2023

We jointly made a submission to a House of Representatives Inquiry into Long COVID, highlighting its impacts on the social and financial wellbeing of RMH patients.



TESTIMONIALS FROM RMH SOCIAL WORK TEAM



IMCL is an invaluable resource for us within the hospital, enabling us to provide comprehensive support to patients who have experienced significant trauma.

These patients often face complex issues surrounding tenancy, lease agreements, enduring powers of attorney, intervention orders, and ongoing Family Court proceedings, all of which are deeply intertwined with their personal experiences and challenges.

As social workers, having access to legal experts through IMCL is incredibly beneficial. It allows us to confidently refer patients for accurate legal advice, ensuring that we do not inadvertently provide incorrect information or create unrealistic expectations regarding legal matters beyond our scope or expertise.

Just this week alone, I have referred three patients to IMCL. Each referral was promptly acknowledged, and I was kept informed about the planned follow-up actions for each case. This responsiveness not only makes the referral process feel meaningful but also reassures us that the patients' needs are being actively addressed.

Additionally, I recently attended a family safety training session presented by one of the IMCL lawyers. The insights shared were incredibly valuable, reflecting a depth of compassion, empathy, and understanding that stands out even among legal professionals. Their approach significantly enhanced my understanding of the legal complexities faced by patients and families in vulnerable situations.

IMCL's commitment to providing ongoing training for our team equips us with the knowledge and skills to better support our patients.

This partnership forms a vital referral pathway for social workers, and the level of support IMCL offers is something that would be difficult to replicate otherwise.

In summary, IMCL is an essential collaborator for us social workers and the patients we serve.



I have recently worked with IMCL to support a patient who had a court hearing for charges related to his new disability.

IMCL were instrumental in helping him navigate this complex legal process.

They provided clear guidance, advocacy, and supported him in attending court, leading to a great outcome.

As a social worker it is great we have access to this service that assists us in providing a holistic approach to wellbeing for our patients.

We often come across situations with our patients that require legal advice, so it's fantastic we are able to feel supported with this from IMCL!



CASE STUDIES FROM CLIENTS

The onsite legal clinics make it possible for people to get legal help by breaking down the barriers to access to resolve complex legal problems.

Names and other identifying features have been changed.

Ana's story

Breaking a cycle of financial abuse and debt

Ana is an older person with disabilities who lives with her adult son, Sam. She was brought to RMH emergency department by police following an incident where Sam had assaulted her.

A social worker spoke with her in Emergency; she was highly distressed and scared to speak further to police as she didn't want Sam to get into trouble. Ana was referred into the Family Safety Team (FST), as it was not safe for her to be discharged home.

After a secondary consultation with IMCL's on-call lawyer, FST staff confirmed police had issued a safety notice and there would be an Intervention Order (IVO) hearing the following week.

Ana agreed to a referral and an IMCL lawyer met with her the following day on the ward. Ana instructed she didn't want Sam to live with her anymore, but still wanted to have contact with him. Ana disclosed concerns that Sam had incurred debts in her name and had been driving her car.

IMCL agreed to assist Ana with representation at court for the IVO. An IVO was made which excludes Sam from the home and IMCL opened another file to assist Ana have Sam removed from the lease.

Ana returned home and IMCL assisted her to resolve \$6000 of fines Sam has incurred in her name.

To protect Ana from future risk of financial abuse by Sam, IMCL helped Ana make a Power of Attorney. IMCL referred Ana to a financial counselling service to resolve the debts incurred by Sam in her name.

Nandita's story

Navigating legal problems which were intimately connected with her health

Nandita lives with an acquired brain injury (ABI) – a disability resulting from a 40 metre fall while rock climbing.

After her accident Nandita rushed her recovery so she could return to work but it quickly became clear that her decision-making abilities had been affected by her fall.

Nandita was regularly visiting The Royal Melbourne Hospital for treatment for her ABI. It was a social worker there who suggested she might have legal needs as well as health needs, referring her to our on-site legal clinic.

Unable to work, Nandita was experiencing significant financial stress. When we saw her at the hospital she had been evicted from the property where she was living. Nandita disclosed that she had a number of debts for large personal loans that she had incurred to support herself when her employment ceased.

She also explained that her ABI was like "a life-long concussion", which made it very difficult to manage her finances.

IMCL sent debt waiver requests along with a letter of support from Nandita's social worker to various debt collectors, asking them to take her circumstances into account.

The result was a waiving of nearly \$50,000 of Nandita's outstanding debts.

This turned Nandita's life around. She told us: "Now I am actually able to breathe, I can fully focus on my therapy ... I can plan for my future."

Steven's story

Access to legal help to focus on medical treatment and rebuild relationships

Steven first had contact with mental health services in 2007 after an intentional overdose but it wasn't until 2021 that he was diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Following an incident with his partner in 2022, Steven was charged with intentionally causing injury, recklessly causing injury and common assault. Police also initiated an application for an Intervention Order (IVO) against Steven for the protection of his partner.

Steven reported not feeling himself on the day of the assault but did not recall what occurred beyond sitting on a couch with police officers in attendance. He learned that an alleged assault on his partner had occurred, and he was taken into custody. He has little memory of what happened next.

The police assessed that Steven was experiencing a mental health episode and transferred him to hospital for assessment under the Mental Health Act. He was admitted to the John Cade Unit at The Royal Melbourne Hospital and placed on an Involuntary Treatment Order.

Steven's social worker at John Cade Unit referred him to IMCL after police attended on him in hospital to serve an application and warrant for the IVO, also foreshadowing that he should attend the police station after his discharge to be interviewed in relation to criminal charges.

IMCL spoke with Steven to give him legal advice and arranged to represent him the following week at the Magistrates Court for the hearing of the IVO.

After further contact from police, IMCL gave

Steven pre-interview advice to prepare him for attending the police station, where he was subsequently charged with criminal offences arising from the incident. IMCL immediately started to gather medical evidence. Steven's treating team, with his consent, liaised with IMCL lawyers to provide information regarding his mental state at the time of admission to hospital.

After reviewing medical evidence about Steven's hospitalisation which showed that he had been experiencing a deterioration in his mental health in the weeks before the incident, and based on the clinical opinion that he was experiencing a significant episode of mental ill health at the time of the incident which led to his behaviour, his lawyer sought to negotiate with Victoria Police prosecutors to consider withdrawing the charges on the basis of mental impairment.

Police were unwilling to withdraw the charges over a number of months, despite providing a significant volume of medical material to prosecutors confirming Steven's mental state, requiring the matter to be adjourned to a contested mention.

As a result, IMCL obtained a further psychological report which confirmed the view that he was experiencing a mental impairment at the time of the incident which led to police attendance.

Ultimately, police accepted the report and withdrew the charges against Steven, and costs were awarded to IMCL. This allowed Steven to focus on his medical treatment and rebuilding his relationships and ensured that he was not criminalised for conduct that occurred while he was profoundly unwell.

Joe's story

Helping Joe leave hospital safely

We saw Joe at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, where he was an inpatient.

Joe suffers from a complex medical disorder and had recently attempted suicide, in part because he was struggling to deal with the family violence that he was experiencing from his sibling who lived at home with him and his elderly mother. He was very worried about returning home, and concerned for his safety and wellbeing.

There was already a limited Intervention Order in place for his protection, but it still allowed his sibling to live with him and contact him.

We contacted police to see if they would assist Joe, because he was very vulnerable but they would not take any action in part because of his mental health issues.

Despite being eligible for release, the hospital was also reluctant to discharge him due to concerns for his safety.

IMCL assisted Joe to draft an application to have the IVO varied, and arranged with the Melbourne Magistrates' Court for him to make his application the day he was discharged from hospital. If we did not have our existing relationship with the court, it is likely that we would not have been able to get Joe an expedited court appointment.

Joe was able to successfully vary the IVO to exclude his sibling so that he could safely return home and not remain in hospital unnecessarily.



Harriet's story

Securing debt to support recover from a mental health episode

Harriet was admitted to hospital after experiencing her first episode of psychosis.

Two months before her admission, and while her mental health was deteriorating, Harriet lost her job and her home, and had drifted away from family and friends. It was during this time that Harriet accrued a number of fines and debts.

Harriet was supported by a social worker, who identified these outstanding legal matters and referred her to IMCL's on-site legal service.

Through our advocacy, we successfully managed to waive Harriet's fines. We also managed to substantially reduce her debt by more than 91 per cent and arrange a payment plan for the remaining balance.

Harriet has told us that she was very happy with this outcome, and that she is working hard to get her life back on track.

She explained that the fact that she no longer had substantial debts hanging over her head was a huge relief and gave her the space she needed to focus on her recovery.





Amir's story

Fighting the criminalisation of acute mental distress

Twenty-five-year-old Amir was walking in Melbourne's Central Business District while experiencing acute mental distress. He stopped a person to ask for the time. The person took out their phone to tell Amir the time when he attempted to take the mobile. A struggle ensued and the victim was pushed to the ground. Amir ran away with the phone.

Victoria Police located Amir and charged him with robbery, theft and unlawful assault.

Amir was referred to IMCL through our partnership with The Royal Melbourne Hospital, who had been providing mental health support to him for almost 12 months before the incident. Amir was seeking treatment because his experience of migrating and settling in Australia had caused trauma and episodes of poor mental health.

IMCL was able to focus on building the best possible defence because our partners at RMH ensured Amir was well-supported and remained engaged with both his treatment regime and the court process. Amir's doctors outlined his progress in a

supporting letter that our lawyers could submit to the court. We could provide the Magistrates' Court with details of his treatment regime, Amir's commitment to the process so far, and the resulting progress since the incident.

Our lawyers could argue that Amir was an educated young man with no criminal record capable of contributing to the community and he had a good chance of rehabilitating in the community if the Magistrate took these mitigating factors into account.

We were successful and the charges were discharged, no conviction was recorded, and a diversion plan was granted.

Amir apologised to the victim, was placed on a good behavior bond and made an undertaking to continue his treatment. This has allowed Amir to focus on his recovery and get his life on track without the fear that the incident will be revealed to the public or any future employer.

The outcome saved the community the costs of incarceration and ensured Amir could fulfill his potential.



INNER
MELBOURNE
COMMUNITY
LEGAL

2/508 Queensberry Street
North Melbourne

22 Bellair Street
Kensington

03 9328 1885
www.imcl.org.au