



www.acrath.org.au

People are NOT for sale

**Australian Catholic Religious
Against Trafficking in Humans**

ACRATH MEDIA RELEASE: 17 June, 2026

Modern slavery case highlights vital health care role and continued training



A recent court case resulting in a Melbourne man being convicted of intentionally possessing a slave has highlighted the importance of frontline health workers being equipped to identify and respond to indicators of exploitation.

A Victorian County Court found Chee Kit 'Max' Chong guilty of slavery and assault offences following evidence of sustained exploitation, coercion and severe abuse of a vulnerable woman.

The case has prompted calls for strengthening awareness and capability amongst first responders, particularly in healthcare.

Australian Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Chris Evans, acknowledged the role frontline healthcare workers played in identifying the abuse. A key witness was St Vincent's Hospital nurse, Eve Wintergreen, who treated the victim in 2022 when she presented to emergency.

"This case shows that victims are often identified not because they can seek help themselves, but because someone recognises the signs and intervenes. In this instance, a healthcare setting provided critical visibility into otherwise hidden exploitation," Commissioner Evans said.

"We must shift the burden away from victims and ensure our frontline systems are equipped to identify and support them."



www.acrath.org.au

People are NOT for sale

The Commissioner cited research from St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne which showed that 100 per cent of surveyed survivors accessed healthcare during exploitation, some multiple times, with targeted training leading to a 400 per cent increase in identification of modern slavery cases since April 2024.

"This confirms modern slavery is not only a Commonwealth criminal justice issue – it is a public health issue that requires greater engagement with the states," the Commissioner said.

St Vincent's Health Australia (SVHA) began working with ACRATH in 2017 to raise awareness of the issue of modern slavery through the Advocates for Change program.

Three years ago, SVHA received Federal Government funding to develop a screening tool and learning modules for upskilling frontline healthcare staff in identifying patients experiencing different forms of modern slavery, including domestic servitude, debt bondage, forced labour and sexual exploitation.

Commenting on the significance of the Melbourne court case and conviction, Eve, who is SVHA's Anti-Modern Slavery Project Manager, and Tarang Jain, SVHA Modern Slavery Liaison Officer, said the trial exposed how exploitation can happen to anyone, in this case, an elderly pastor seeking an opportunity to travel while serving a family she trusted.



Melissa Halliday and Tarang Jain -
ACRATH's National Office, April 2026.



Eve Wintergreen

"Many in our Australian community don't yet understand that these crime types are happening in all of our neighbourhoods, suburbs and electorates," they said.



www.acrath.org.au

People are NOT for sale

“People think that modern slavery involves kidnapping someone off the street, or chaining them up in a basement, but may not understand it can happen in different ways.

“Most Australians take for granted our privileged lifestyle of having cafes and nail salons, massage places and fresh fruit and veg in every strip of shops on every day of the year, for the lowest price – but someone DOES pay the price.”

Eve and Tarang said the court case demonstrated how easily someone could be “forced, tricked and trapped for another’s gain and profit” and sent a powerful message that modern slavery in Australia takes many forms, all of which are crimes.

“This conviction is a significant milestone for both the anti-slavery and healthcare sectors, as clinicians’ impartial observations are proving vital not only for identifying victims in an exploitation situation but also for providing critical evidence if the victim/survivor decides to take legal action in the future,” they said.

SVHA has shared its anti-slavery screening tool, co-created with survivors, with a number of frontline agencies but Eve and Tarang stressed that there was more work to be done and that modern slavery was a public health issue affecting “all of us”.

“There are mis-identifications of exploitation as family or domestic violence, and while the services referred to may benefit the person, they may not address their underlying exploitation needs, with catastrophic consequences,” they said.

“None of us can do this work alone, but together we can all do the work that creates freedom for those who are trapped.”

Eve and Tarang said ACRATH had been instrumental in helping SVHA recognise the importance of making “dignity-affirming care to those experiencing slavery” its core business.

“Their trainings initially gave a handful of ‘champions’ across the service the skills to see what was unseeable, and to hear what was unhearable,” they said.

ACRATH’s ongoing partnership across the past three years through the Attorney General’s grant included developing further training modules, co-delivering education sessions and advocating for additional survivor support services.

Eve and Tarang said that through the rapid upskilling of staff, ACRATH had made it possible for St Vincent’s to lead the health response to modern slavery in Australia.



www.acrath.org.au

People are NOT for sale

“ACRATH’s contribution directly translates to improving the recognition of modern slavery survivors, which is the biggest challenge facing the anti-slavery sector,” they said.

“This work takes incredible courage and heart, and ACRATH deliver every time.

“Not only do they stand in support of survivors, but they stand in support of the health services wrapping around survivors. For that, we are truly so grateful.”

ACRATH’s community development project officer, Melissa Halliday said the long-term partnership with SVHA demonstrated the importance of cross-sector collaboration and how it can lead to deep education, but also to system change.

“The partnership has also allowed us more deeply explore how patients who have experienced modern slavery present in health care settings, adding to the broader knowledge base and understanding of modern slavery as a public health issue in Australia,” Melissa said.

“The collaboration also supports advocacy work as we develop a better understanding of what system changes are needed.”

She said SVHA, founded by the Sisters of Charity, had enacted its mission values by supporting the anti-slavery project team in its work over the past few years, and as a result has had a “real and direct” impact on people experiencing modern slavery in Australia.

Note: ACRATH have launched their mid-year fundraising appeal. Please consider a [donation](#) in support of their vital work.

For more information please contact:
Angela Duthie: networks@acrath.org.au
ACRATH Communications Lead