

Detective Leading Senior Constable Leeanne Trusler heard the job on the police radio and knew it was going to be bad. When she arrived at the scene she gave CPR to a girl who had been the victim of a knife attack. But the girl couldn't be revived and Detective Trusler and her team began shutting down the area.

A woman and young girl arrived claiming to be the victim's mother and sister. The police officers couldn't find any identification on the body, so Detective Trusler asked the woman to call her daughter's mobile. The phone found on the girl rang and the senior sergeant asked Trusler to tell the mother that it was her daughter who had died.

While it was a difficult and unpleasant thing to have to do, she had no choice. Detective Trusler was the one to tell Masa Vukotic's mother that her 17-year-old daughter had been murdered.

Trusler says seeing Masa's body "did some damage". Masa was the same age and looked a bit like one of her own daughters.

Her colleagues call Trusler the "Angel of Death" because of her ability to deliver devastating news to families and do it well and with compassion.

"I've had to do too many death notices. I remember doing seven one week before Christmas."

Number seven was a man hurrying home on his push bike to take his four-year-old daughter shopping to buy a Christmas tree. His heart simply stopped and he dropped dead in High Street, Ashburton.

She believes women are often better at death notifications than men; they have an ability to speak calmly and appear approachable, which helps makes people feel more comfortable. "Women have more patience sometimes, because we've got children. We're seen as more responsive and we're better listeners," Trusler says.

Jobs like this and work generally done by the female officers of Victoria Police have far too often been dismissed as "women's work".

But this work, like all police work, can have serious consequences on an officer's mental health. Last week, Victoria Police confirmed the suicide of a female leading senior constable at the Seaford Multi-Disciplinary Centre, where officers deal with some of the state's worst crimes, including child abuse and domestic violence.

Clearly it takes its toll. As VicPol approaches the 100th anniversary of women in "the job," has it always been this way?

On July 31, 1917, Madge Connor and Elizabeth Beers were appointed as Victoria police agents; they had no powers of arrest and did not wear a uniform. Four years later, four women, including Connor, were sworn in with the same powers as men.

There would be many influential female officers in the years that followed. In 1939, Jessie Clarey won the King's Gold Medal - an essay competition open to the police forces of the British Empire - for her article on the causes and treatments of youth crime. In 1950, Grace Brebner was promoted to the Criminal Investigation Branch and became the first female detective in Australia.

When speaking with *Police Life* magazine in the 1950s about apprehending male criminals, she said there was a right way and a wrong way to arrest offenders. "Calmness

Women wounded on thin blue line

The suicide of a female police officer has focused attention on protecting officers' mental health. **Bridget Davies** reports.



Detective Constable Leeanne Trusler believes women are often better at death notifications than men. Photo: Justin McManus

and authority without bluster are all that's needed," Detective Brebner said.

"She was a bitch, but she had to be," Trusler says. Though they weren't related, Trusler called her "Aunty Grace".

Policewomen during the 1960s and '70s had close relationships because there were so few of them. Trusler's mother Gwen knew Grace well. A young Trusler called all the policewomen without children, "Aunty".

Leeanne Trusler only ever wanted to be a policewoman, just like her mother. When she was 12 years old, Trusler put a Mother's Day notice in a newspaper which read: "Roses are red, violets are blue, you're a copper, I want to be one too".

Gwendoline Fowler, nee Nestor, was a tram conductress who joined the force in 1956, following in the footsteps of her father, two brothers, an uncle and three cousins. She was one of just three women in a squad of 20.

Fowler had no baton and no firearm, just the uniform handbag, in

which she used to put a brick for protection.

"We only had our mouths," Fowler used to tell her daughter. But she wasn't one to shy away from frontline policing.

"She worked like one of the blokes, because she had to," Trusler says.

"They were basically told, 'Suck it up, princess'."

Ralph Staveley, retired detective chief inspector

During her time at Russell Street, Bendigo and Geelong, Gwen Nestor arrested car thieves, sly grog merchants, illegal abortionists, armed robbers, prostitutes, pimps and brothel keepers.

But this work took a mental and emotional toll. Trusler says one of her mother's duties from 1956-64 was to collect dead babies who had been abandoned by their mothers

because they couldn't have an abortion because it was illegal.

The first thing Nestor did was take the tiny body up to the priest at the cemetery in Carlton to have the child baptised. In those days, there was no counselling for police officers, no debriefing.

Later in life, she told Trusler those babies would often come back to her in the middle of the night.

Retired detective chief inspector Ralph Staveley spent 40 years in the force and is president of the Police Historical Society. He recalls that freshly graduated male and female police officers would be separated. Men began full duties and women were based at the Russell Street Women's Division. Staveley found the women's station was often more organised and far more disciplined than a lot of men's divisions.

The introduction of equal opportunity legislation in 1978 contributed to policewomen being offered a wider range of duties, but women still had to work harder to achieve the same recognition as the men.

"They were straight as a die and perhaps they only weren't liked because they wouldn't take any bull-dust from a bloke," Staveley says.

Both male officers and the public could be dismissive of the work done by female officers.

"All too often, the role of women was not seen as 'real police work', yet some of these dysfunctional homes that they visited, were the breeding ground of crime," Staveley says.

Female officers dealt with some of the most graphic crime scenes, interviewing rape victims or removing children from abusive homes.

"The irony was what they saw, in many cases, was much more con-

fronting than what the men saw, and the men said they were doing all the tough, macho jobs," Staveley says.

But again, a system without support failed them. "They were basically told, 'Suck it up, princess'," Staveley says.

The impact of the work they did affected many officers throughout their lives. "That human cost has been completely overlooked," Staveley says. If they had to cry, it was to be done on their own time.

Joan Paffett believes the job is harder for women today than it was when she served. She joined in 1966 as the only woman in her squad and stayed for more than 30 years. She started at Russell Street and worked across Caulfield, Murrumbidgee and Benteleigh before retiring in Moorabbin.

Like Leeanne Trusler and her mother Gwen, Paffett is the daughter of a police officer. She says, despite what people may think, she never experienced any sexist behaviour from male officers.

"I think all the girls were well respected by the guys and also by the public," Paffett says.

With no formal counselling, there was a relaxed attitude to dealing with trauma and officers were left alone to deal with their emotions.

"I remember working one morning at Russell Street. A baby had been mauled by a dog in Royal Park. When the girls came back from the job, the boss poured them a brandy each. That was the counselling," Paffett says.

Emma Cole, from Tongala, recently sat the police entrance exam and is about to complete her physical and psychological assessments. Cole, 24, is undeterred by the potentially dangerous situations she is likely to encounter.

"I want to be mentally and physically challenged. And I want to help people in their most traumatic times," Cole says.

The night Doncaster schoolgirl Masa Vukotic was murdered, the family in the house closest to the crime scene handed Detective Trusler their keys. They said they could no longer live there after what they had seen. Yet officers, both female and male, are expected to deal with similar scenarios every day.

That night, Masa's father had been out searching for his daughter when he arrived on the scene. He asked Trusler if his daughter was dead. Trusler says he grabbed her so hard he accidentally bruised her skin.

Trusler says dealing with such situations is not easy and can break some officers. Her mother Gwen and another policewoman, Kate Dwyer, started the Retired Policewomen's Association in the 1970s, to help women who weren't coping with the trauma that came back to haunt them in their later years.

Though officers now have access to counselling services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, there still have been 62 police suicides nationally over the past 12 years.

Such is the concern that last month Victoria Police Commissioner Graham Ashton ordered a comprehensive investigation into how to improve the mental health of police officers.

Trusler knew the policewoman from Seaford who committed suicide at work last Monday, when she was a recruitment officer at the Police Academy in the 1990s.

"She was such a good kid," she says.



Gwen Fowler, who graduated in 1957, said the memory of dead babies would return to her in the night for years afterwards.