

Lawyer Mums Australia



Elizabeth Nicholson
Crown Prosecutors' Chambers

Elizabeth Nicholson speaks with Sharna Clemmett, barrister at Greenway Chambers, about her volunteer role as an administrator of Lawyer Mums Australia, an online community of women barristers and solicitors who provide practical advice and emotional support to each other.

Elizabeth Nicholson (EN): Tell me a little bit about how you came to volunteer your time as an administrator of the Lawyer Mums Australia Facebook group, or LMA?

Sharna Clemmett (SC): I became a member of LMA in July 2017. The group had been started by Anthea McIntyre, of McIntyre Legal, in 2014, when she had left her role at a top-tier law firm and was at a career crossroad. She was thinking about starting up her own practice as a sole practitioner, was studying her master's degree, and parenting two very young children. She wanted a safe place to talk to other women about the juggle and reality of being a legal practitioner and a mother, where they could support one another and bounce ideas off each other, so she set up the LMA Facebook group.

At that time, a group in that particular format was quite a new idea. I became an admin[istrator] when I had been in the group for about a year. I didn't know Anthea very well at the time. I ran into her in a café on Phillip Street and I could tell she was under a lot of pressure. I offered to assist with the load of administering LMA, just for a 'patch' at the time, purely because Anthea seemed like she needed a hand. That patch has turned into about six years!

EN: The LMA Facebook group includes approximately 7,300 women lawyers across Australia. That is a large proportion of the female legal practitioners in Australia. What is it about the group or the technology that has made it such a popular way of accessing support?

SC: I think the reason it has taken off as it has is because women in the profession find it such a useful support network – both because of the content of the group, but also because of

the accessibility which comes from the use of technology. In our lives, it is so hard to find time! If you want to speak to someone about an issue you're having, finding times that align for them and you can be really hard – whereas when it's an online forum like LMA you can step in and out when it's convenient. You can get the support, without having to make sure the person you are getting it from is actually available at the same time as you, and – because of the composition of the group – without even knowing beforehand who among the people you're asking has relevant experience or advice on the topic. It's an important way to communicate with other people going through similar things. And for busy women in the profession getting advice or contributing to the group is also almost always part of a multitasking exercise – she might be drafting submissions, or cooking dinner, or answering a child's question, or all of those things ... and at the same time putting a question or answer into LMA!

EN: What does your role as administrator of the group involve?

SC: As you can imagine, it takes a lot of work to properly administer a group of that size. Usually, first thing in the morning I check whether there are any pending posts. All posts in the group require administrator approval. I spend a few minutes approving or declining as appropriate. Then, throughout the day I check pending posts if I have a few moments – say at lunch, or on the end of another task.

We also process applications for membership to the group. We review every single membership application carefully to make sure the person applying is actually a legal practitioner. We check the roll in their state or territory. Members do not necessarily have to be a mother – the group is open to all women in the profession. But they do need to be a practising lawyer. Going through those membership applications takes some time.

EN: How do you balance the time commitment of administering LMA with your paid work as a barrister?

SC: I carve out the time in my day, usually by taking small periods of time at the end of other tasks – for example, I'll finish a set of submissions and then spend 15 minutes doing LMA administration work. It requires a bit of time every single day, but the amount of time I spend per day can vary wildly. It may be as little as an hour, made up of a few periods of 10 to 15 minutes throughout the day; or it may be as much as three or four hours if there is a particularly big issue that has arisen in the group. I don't always get time to engage with the issues being discussed in the group, but often I do. And I get so much out of the group that it doesn't really feel like 'work'.



Sharna Clemmett

EN: What are some of the risks or issues that arise in administering a support network on an online platform such as the LMA Facebook group?

Administering the group, particularly as it has grown so large, does involve being aware of and managing some risk. We manage these risks by requiring all members to be practising legal practitioners, requiring that administrators approve every post in the group, and requiring members to adhere to the group rules at all times.

We do rely on the fact that every member in the group also has their own ethical duties as solicitors and barristers. That is one of the reasons we are so scrupulous about confirming that every individual member is a legal practitioner. We are quite careful about ensuring that posts in the group don't disclose confidential details about clients or identify the matter. Members can report problematic posts or comments, too, so we have an opportunity to review content others think raises an issue.

It also means that we need to be across particular rules in certain practice areas – for example, there is a statutory prohibition against publishing any detail which identifies the parties in a family law matter. As administrators, we try to be across those things – but we also rely on members' reports.

It also involves keeping one eye on liability issues. We're particularly aware of potential defamation issues, and certainly some recent defamation cases have added an additional layer of caution in that respect. We are mindful that this is a group of professionals, and each of their reputations is important in the context of that forum and the profession. There have been occasions when posts have been shared with external third parties in breach of the rules – on one occasion a post was shared with the *Daily Mail*, and on another occasion a post was shared with a now former solicitor, and that led to threats of defamation action and disciplinary complaints against the administrators of the group. When we find out who has shared the post, they are removed from the group.

The other difficulty or risk with an online support group as large as ours is that it can be difficult to

moderate discussions about topics that have a high degree of emotion or diversity of opinions. Sometimes, there are posts that can be problematic or triggering for others in the group. When we consider approval of posts, we try to bear that in mind. It is a balancing act, and one we don't always get right despite our best efforts. Some members may want to discuss something happening in the news, but that topic may impact some members personally or be triggering for some members, and over the years there have been some topics that we have had to shut down entirely because our first priority has to be the wellbeing of members. The reason we are so firm about all posts requiring administrator approval is because, although it takes more work to administer the group in that way, it is also the means to ensure effective administration of the group.

EN: What role do you think technology can have in the way a barrister can access supports or navigate issues at the Bar?

SC: I think online forums like LMA are an important way of getting support. I also think there is an important place for a form of anonymous communication with someone senior in the profession who you know has a good understanding of the practice of law and balancing competing demands. Recently, the NSW Bar has introduced an anonymous reporting system for sexual harassment, which is quite important, and I hope that people take it up.

However, I do believe that the NSW Bar could harness technology better in practice-related ways. The open-door policy at the Bar is a great thing, but if someone is working remotely or not in chambers, it isn't always possible to access that in-person support. Of course, we have access to email and phone calls, but sometimes the difficulty of trying to find aligning availability is just insurmountable! An online forum would be useful in that context. At LMA we tend to stay away from practice areas, but I'm aware that there are some practice-specific Facebook groups that function in this way and members can ask very specific practice-related questions and get advice from senior practitioners in those areas. I also think it would be great if there were a Lawyer Dads group, because more and more, now, men are balancing careers and caring responsibilities.

EN: What changes have you seen in how members interact in LMA over the years you've been administering the group?

SC: A significant feature that has been introduced since I began administering the group is the 'anonymous post' function. Prior to the introduction of that option, the administrators were asked to put up anonymous posts for people, and we would post it ourselves with the headline 'Anonymous Post'. That was a lot of work! The anonymous post button is much easier, and people feel it is truly anonymous because they don't have to message us first. The content of the posts hasn't really changed, though

– there has always been a real baring of the soul by many women in the group.

EN: Did you observe any change in the LMA group during the years of the pandemic?

SC: Yes, definitely. There was a significant increase in posts. Tensions were high, and we could certainly tell people were struggling. There were really strong reactions to things. During that time, we were a little more flexible around the rules of being kind and polite – because it was obvious that people were having a difficult time managing. We had lots of members of the LMA at home with very young children while also trying to carry their full-time load – it was insane. LMA admin also spent a lot of time checking in with individual members who we had noticed were particularly struggling.

EN: Given the huge time and labour commitment that it must involve, what motivates you to continue giving your time to the cause?

SC: I think it's important to make the time, because so many people do get so much from the group. It's a really great support network when people don't know who else to ask. For me, it's about giving back. We've all had times when we are in a situation or have an issue that we don't know how to approach or even who to ask. That group has been great for a lot of people as the place to turn to, where you can ask those questions. The time and labour it takes to run the group is tiring – but it does make a difference to so many people. When we get a message from someone expressing thanks or that the group has benefited them, it's a reminder of exactly why we continue to give our time.

EN: What do you see as the importance of giving back to the profession?

SC: It's important so that people don't feel alone. If junior people can see that senior people are making themselves available as a sounding board, I think that gives them more confidence to ask questions. It's good for morale, and for the profession more broadly. Since I've been administering LMA, I am often contacted by people with practice-related questions. They know from my role in LMA that I am happy to listen and express a view. It's important for all people to have someone to check in with.

EN: Do you have any advice for New South Wales barristers who would like to explore a volunteer role as well as their paid work?

SC: I think it's about finding something that can fit between other commitments. That can make it hard to find opportunities. If you need to have support around you to fit it in, it's important to know you have that support for whatever time commitment is needed – so finding out what time will be required and knowing that will work for those who do support you is important before you take it on. Whatever it is, I think you have to love it, or at least really believe in it, to find the energy you need to do it. **BN**

I have been a member of Lawyer Mums Australia since about 2018 when I met Anthea McIntyre, when we both participated on a panel at a Women Lawyers conference. Since then I have been a reasonably active poster. The community is a very supportive one, and I meet 'Llamas' in all sorts of places. Unlike other Facebook groups of which I am a member, the vibe is generally very supportive and positive, which I find refreshing.

In a professional sense, it is very useful to search when I need a junior with particular qualifications or a specific resource, as questions have often been asked before. In the personal sphere, I have been able to refresh my personal style, get recommendations for kitchen and other items, and even found a solution to a cat with poor urinary habits. I recently went on to share my concerns about getting through a year of not one, but two children doing their HSC, and got some wonderful support. I know I have been the enabler for the purchase of a number of handbags.

Sharna and Anthea do an absolutely sterling job of keeping thousands of women lawyers in line in a community which is constructive, supportive, and – most importantly – confidential. It is striking what a sense of community can do. A number of the members are in remote or rural sole practices, or starting out at the Bar, and I am sure that the community provided by LMA is a positive one.

Jane Needham SC
13th Floor, St James Hall Chambers

If not for the 'Llamas' (also known as the WWIMP, or 'wise women in my phone') I would probably give up social media altogether. But it's everything most social media isn't: an incredible community of women staying real and supporting each other. It's a lifeline of humour, good sense and compassion. It's women in the trenches with you, or who have been there before you, cheering you on. I'm indebted to Sharna and Anthea, who've managed to keep it a safe space. They've done a tremendous service to the 7,000+ Llamas who have come to depend on the 'wise women in their phones' on the daily, sharing everything from career advice to baking 'fails' (#imalawyerotabaker) [and] parenting concerns to professional triumphs and frustrations. It's the group most of us consult before making all manner of life decisions: from negotiating a raise, to buying a new post-baby work wardrobe (or robes!), making a referral, booking a holiday, finding a pumping room in an unfamiliar courthouse, tackling a co-parenting challenge, dealing with difficult colleagues or opponents, or buying an air-fryer.

Julia Roy
Sixth Floor Selborne Wentworth Chambers