

Editorial



Lloyd Owen

Since the last issue of *Children Australia* was published, the child, youth and family welfare field in Australia has been saddened to learn of the death of Robin Clark. After an outstanding career as a practitioner and senior manager in Victoria, Robin, in recent years, engaged in consultancies in various States and inevitably produced a positive learning process and a powerful, insightful result. Her report 'It has to be more than a job: A search for exceptional practice with troubled adolescents' (Clark, 2000), has recently been republished for wider distribution by the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria. She was a frequent and valued contributor to projects, meetings and conferences. She was engaged in the pursuit of excellence and trod many difficult paths in unpopular territory in an inherently turbulent and somewhat deprived field. Her incisive questions and her friendly encouragement will be greatly missed by many.

As we move further into 2001, we see many people beaver away at the task of achieving a better understanding of the nature and needs of children, young people and families at risk of harm or exclusion in contemporary society, and better ways of responding to them. It is a field where one frequently encounters much goodwill and outstanding dedicated effort. It is a field where, in spite of many successful interventions and innovations, there are always a new batch of challenges emerging. It is a field also where many needs and potential solutions are obvious but hamstrung by a host of constraints – some wicked problems which seem to stay about forever.

Last week I spent some time in a fairly diverse country region in Victoria, talking with a number of agency and departmental people about services for adolescents 'at risk'. Some of the good things going on, expressed in that particular context, included the commitment and continuity of staff; a positive degree of collaboration and goodwill between services; good home-based care recruitment and retention; good networking in rural communities; a common focus on client needs; considerable exercise of creativity (sometimes as a response to low resource levels); and considerable expertise, knowledge and interest in building better intervention strategies and a better system of services. Together we have been able to identify quite a lot of literature and sources of good ideas about strategies and

services. There was, however, a list of initiatives needed now by people at the coal face. The list included more realistic appropriate funding, attention to legislative anomalies and provisions which hamper specific, timely and flexible responses to need. Placement and support services were seen to require better, stronger, quicker responses at intake with better and more coordinated assessment capability and an improved level and range of placement possibilities. Greater access to intensive family support options was seen to be needed and the perennial requirement for better collaboration between welfare, education and health systems and better integration at the interface of primary services and the secondary/tertiary service systems. Another issue flagged for attention was worker succession to ensure continuity of the skill base in the region. This related further to the continuous need to engage in ongoing staff training and development.

Another of Robin Clark's recent contributions to the field was as co-researcher and author with Jane Morton and John Pead of a report for the Victorian Department of Human Services about intensive therapeutic and residential service options for young people in the out-of-home care system. The recognition has become established that there are residual effects of earlier abuse and neglect which demand levels of help beyond simply good care. For young people manifesting emotional and/or behavioural disturbance, there is greater recognition of underlying attachment difficulties, post traumatic stress reactions and a range of specific barriers to positive growth, development and quality of life. It was of interest to note among the responses of the regional practitioners that they wanted for their young people and families the ability either to deliver themselves or to access therapeutic services and therapeutic consultation. More appropriately qualified and appropriately paid workers were needed for community service organisations supported by a realistically funded 24 hour response capacity. On the ground, around the young person, ready access is often needed to the knowledge and skills in close working relationships, of workers from mental health, health, education, disability services, juvenile justice and alcohol and drug service systems. A challenge is to find ways of providing such access in urban areas, in provincial cities, towns, rural areas and remote communities. Interestingly the Morton, Clark and Pead (1999) report 'When care is not

enough' pointed to the need for core interventions which seek to ensure physical and emotional safety; provide and support relationships which offer the possibility of secure attachment; address the aftermath of trauma; facilitate new learning across all contexts and address educational/vocational needs; and, provide a developmentally appropriate balance between empowerment and limit setting. Therapeutic interventions were seen to be desirable in contexts of relationships with family of origin and extended family; relationships with carers and staff; relationships with peers; education and vocational training; and in respect to recreation and entertainment.

The report goes on to identify a number of principles which should apply to service provision. In brief, they are:

- Intervene early in the cycle of accumulating layers of harm (assistance before abuse occurs and as soon as possible after abuse is detected; address emotional disturbance in childhood before adolescence adds difficulty; address behavioural disturbance before it becomes life threatening, ie, early drug use, self harm, aggression).
 - Provide expert screening and assessment in an agreed cross sectoral format enabling planned treatment and care from point of entry. Target intensive therapeutic services to those who have severe abuse/neglect or manifest severe emotional and attachment disturbance as part of their history.
 - Provide integrated therapeutic interventions according to a shared and holistic, long term perspective – delivered to a person, not a package of behaviours – with systems working together across program and geographic boundaries using consistent methods toward shared ends.
 - Support staff and carers to deliver effective therapeutic interventions backed by research and expert opinion. Expert supervision, consultation, training and support should be provided to staff.
 - Provide services in a community setting wherever possible and on an outreach basis if necessary. For young people with extreme levels of disturbance, serious offences should be addressed where possible with mandatory, intensive, evidence-based, therapeutic intervention rather than custodial sentences.
 - Ensure a seamless net of services, maximising continuity and losses and transitional issues where these occur.
 - Therapeutic interventions should cover as many hours of the day and as many life areas as possible.
 - Behavioural expectations should be explicit, realistic and fair containing meaningful rewards and incentives for pro-social behaviour, and limits and sanctions for anti-social behaviour (these should be consistent, humane, realistic and relationship based).
- A positive peer culture should be sought and ensured in all settings in which young people are with peers (eg, residential group care, educational/vocational/recreational settings, treatment, crisis care, custodial settings).
 - Consider both short and long term risk when deciding appropriateness of compulsion; some short term risk may be appropriate in the pursuit of decreased long term risk.

Although the report was concerned with tertiary service intervention, the authors point to the importance of primary and secondary prevention, the central significance of the role of educational/vocational services and the importance of careful attention to the transition of young people leaving the care system. Such reflections provide a useful backdrop to the issues raised by contributors to this issue of *Children Australia*.

Dorothy Scott in an address reflects on changes in both perspectives and systems 'yesterday, today and tomorrow'. Freda Briggs and Shelley Campbell share some of their experience and viewpoints about evaluations in community-based child and family welfare services. Frank Ainsworth examines evidence and arguments around the use of residential care for 'at risk' adolescents. Cas O'Neill reports on some interesting home based care research on sensitivities and relationships between carers and workers. Chris Goddard and Bernadette Saunders share observations about the role and influence of the media in objectifying children. Sarah Whiteside reports on research conducted with 33 South Australian teachers which highlights some difficulties attached to delivering personal safety curriculum in junior primary school.

The reviews in this issue also reflect the breadth and complexity of this field. Philip Mendes has provided an overview of the report of the Commission of Inquiry into the abuse of children in Queensland institutions; and there are reviews of a video on foster care and a book on issues related to 'giftedness' in children.

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REFERENCES

- Clark, R. 2000, *It has to be more than a job: A search for exceptional practice with troubled adolescents*, Deakin Human Services Australia, on behalf of the Policy & Practice Research Unit, Deakin University, Melbourne.
- Morton, J., Clark, R. & Pead, J. 1999, *When care is not enough, consultants' report on behalf of Department of Human Services*, Victoria, Melbourne.