

Editorial

Lloyd Owen



As we confront this part of the nineties what a jangling juxtaposition of images strikes us as we contemplate the 'what is?' and the 'what should be?' of child, youth and family welfare in Australia. On the one hand there is an array of innovative pilot programs focused on enhanced practice, better outcomes and needs-based or customer-driven principles. There are some research supported trials of overseas innovations such as the UK 'Looking After Children' assessment, case planning and review system and the US 'Families and Schools Together' program. Many task groups, committees and consultants in government and non-government sectors are tackling issues such as provision for high-risk adolescents and infants seen to be in high-risk situations; in some instances programmatic responses are following, many with a preventive aspect such as those focused on drug and alcohol abuse and youth suicide prevention. There is a recognition that in Australia we have a relatively long standing base of collaborating agencies in both public and non-government sectors, some exceptional programs in maternal and child health, temporary and shared family care and other arenas. The Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators have produced national Baseline Out-of-Home Care Standards and organisations representing children and youth in care and former state wards have emerged and are growing in strength. There are also this year a number of national or Australasian conferences looking for the latest wisdom or the cutting edge of research and innovation to inform policy and practice – home visiting, intensive family services, foster care, child abuse and neglect, and child and family welfare to name a few happening close to the release of this issue of *Children Australia*.

On the other hand we appear to be overwhelmed by a dollar driven ethos, a pervading sense of competition for survival and for many agencies and workers the future vision is one of insecurity and short term survival. Some have girded loins, slimmed down and focused on niche markets or narrower territory. In some instances a renewed interest is evident in the formation of strategic alliances. Others have taken alliances a step further by merging and rationalising with the aim of creating stronger more competitive entities. All spheres of Australian government have been asked to justify

their presence in any form of service delivery under 'steering not rowing' principles of economic rationalism, public assets are being stripped and sold into private sector ownership for profit making and debt retirement purposes. Resources are being shifted to meet equity formulas sometimes, unfortunately, without much consideration to needs-based benchmarks. Public administration is adopting the mantle of business enterprise and restructuring activities along purchaser and provider lines. Activities of all kinds are being reframed as markets or quasi-markets. Many services are being outsourced and functions contracted out in competitive tendering processes. Consultation and advocacy is viewed with some suspicion though we do have an ethos of customer focus and level playing fields. There is however much evidence of lack of opportunity and inequality in many parts of our national community and a struggle to set the scene in a coherent way. The press misses few opportunities to hammer the state and other institutions for shortcomings in attempts to stand *in loco parentis* for children. At the same time there is much evidence of families and communities being stressed by socio-economic circumstances impinging on parenting and integrative roles.

Between these visions in recent days we have witnessed in the death of Diana, Princess of Wales and Mother Theresa something which I suspect brought to the surface a hunger for compassion and our need to grieve in a world where we are constantly and selectively bombarded with images while feeling relatively powerless. How hard it is to turn around death dealing tobacco marketing; to retool for greenhouse gas emission reduction; to replace forest and fishery degradation practices; to address poverty and illiteracy in ways which we know will impact on the world population problems; to stop despots and zealots from placing prejudice in the hearts and minds of children and guns in their hands, perpetuating conflict and displacement of people from their homelands. In spite of Diana's aristocratic background and Mother Theresa's opposition to family planning, they provided models of courage, determination and compassion. Such qualities are needed to confront poverty, inequality and marginalisation, corruption and blind or exploitative privilege. Investing in 'human capital' (health, education and security for productive citizens) and 'social capital' (the glue

that binds us with reciprocity, collaboration, mutual support and trust, especially evidenced in the way we treat those who are vulnerable and dependent) seem to me to be significant components in our vision building for the new millennium. We need to be very wary that a pursuit of contestability and cost saving does not divert us from putting into place the things we know now are needed to build a better child, youth and family welfare system and a better world. Clearly geography and technology will be important components. The territory within which we align services has to be small enough or known well enough or reachable enough with services as intimate and mobile as the flying doctor, to marshal the ingredients for good primary, secondary and tertiary services. Most important also is the ready opportunity for help when and where it is needed, delivered with warmth, respect and a human face. Within it also is needed the climate of trust which will enable sufferers to speak and seek help rather than be exploited and victimised in fear and silence. A web of services is required which can be approached with confidence, which will listen, inquire where necessary and most importantly have the capacity and resources to act and sustain involvement for as long as is necessary for empowered, independent individual and family capacity to be restored or for a sustainable, supportive solution to be found to the problem at hand. We can be confident too that today's solutions are likely to lead us to tomorrow's problems but hopefully our policies take us in the direction of more manageable rather than less manageable conditions.

Contributors to this issue share wisdom and experience which seek to lead us in that direction. Barry Fields reports on some research which points to mobile elements of our population. Interestingly many gain from the mobility of others. There are socio-cultural risks though for the children of the mobile. These are often not acknowledged or, where they are, treated in a victim blaming way. A contemporary vision must include mobility and sensible means to address its consequences. Dorothy Scott shares her observations on home visiting programs, pointing out that, beside the renewed interest in such schemes and the interest in importing some programs from overseas, there are some resounding examples with a longstanding local history such as Legacy which have been an outstanding success. Digby Hannah shares his observations of eighteen years in an outdoor related temporary community. Akin to older notions of therapeutic community it has in a low key way provided opportunities for many to find strengths within themselves, to begin some healing processes and to find friends and perhaps a start on the important task of network building. The realities and metaphors of the natural world add to the experience and may be a very important ingredient. This particular program we believe is about to close with agency rationalisation, but hopefully the learning and future opportunities of a similar kind will not be lost.

Jennie Corkhill reacts to legislation, sentencing practice and court processes using a particular case in South Australia concerned with paedophilia. She points out some inconsistency between local practice and the standards indicated by the Australian Sex Tourism legislation. As a society we seem only to be on the threshold of fully

understanding and responding appropriately to both the victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Responses must include the law and its application but also much more in the way of research into psychosexual development, education for children and families and treatment for survivors and offenders.

Chris Goddard in his column 'Should parents shiver' also pursues the theme of child sexual abuse and paedophilia. The mixture of facts and fears, increasingly revealed as taboos on talk modify to some degree, as institutions become less secretive about abuse within them and as some cases become subject to mass reporting, point up still many gaps in our knowledge. Preventing paedophilia is a pressing community concern. It requires though a thoughtful and comprehensive response. Reliance on incarceration without treatment is likely to be counter productive. Similarly, treatment should link closely with research and the best available evidence concerning effectiveness.

There is a growing body of knowledge related to the child protection field, so much so that its distillation is a challenge. Grant Holland embarked on a study of mandatory reporting – his observations on the Victorian system with a brief note concerning all States and Territories are included in this issue. It will be evident to the reader that keeping up to date in this field across the Federal and eight State/Territory jurisdictions presents a challenge. Some editorial additions became necessary to address recent events in changing systems and structures.

A very useful source of child abuse prevention and child protection information is the National Child Protection Clearing House at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It is now accessible on the Internet at : http://www.aifs.org.au/external/nch/nch_menu.html

Also just released by the Clearing House is an issues paper on *Emotional abuse: The hidden form of maltreatment*.

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