

Almost half the year has gone as I write this Editorial. Most people engaged in our sector are dealing with new practice issues and those of us involved in academic activities have completed Semester 1 and are well along the way with research and evaluation projects.

A number of new initiatives associated with the drought are now progressing well, but the feedback I get from talking with people from across Australia is that many families are struggling with decisions that will have far-reaching consequences. Some people are still finding it difficult to accept the idea of climate change and permanent change to their lives. Earlier work on response to drought, such as Daniela Stehlik's Report *Seeking solutions: Drought responses as capacity building*, which was developed for the National Rural Women's Coalition, has proved important in establishing a long-term view of the issue. The *Tackling Mental Health Drought Initiatives 2006-2007* is a further boost to service delivery in Victoria with a range of rural, regional and urban based services involved. Services now include the Wesley Mission's Drought Personal Support Line, four Sustainable Farm Families programs, and a number of training approaches to alert workers on the ground to evidence of stress of family members.

Now that these services have been implemented, it would be interesting to hear of their progress; and also of the level and nature of need being presented. Many believe that country folk are of a stoic and reticent nature, unlikely to come forward unless all other options have been exhausted, or just plain conservative. However, this scenario is not applicable to all rural communities and, as time goes by, the sheer longevity of the impacts on production and rural businesses is probably resulting in a change of attitude. Perhaps we can encourage some of the practitioners involved in these programs to write of their experiences?

Last month saw the presentation of the Federal Budget which has been received with some reservation, particularly in relation to addressing climate change, dental care, affordable housing and Indigenous disadvantage. I find it concerning that Australians are still strongly oriented to gaining tax cuts which, for households on low to middle incomes, do little in terms of improving access to what are now relatively expensive health, education and housing services. Why is it that Australians don't appear to favour the purchase power of those small tax cuts when combined? Such an amount would go so much further if used to fund free or low cost services for all. Are we, as social workers, health professionals, child care staff and youth workers, unable to advocate strongly enough for sustainable services that would redress some of the inequities so evident in Australian life today?

And still on the issues of budgets, the NSW Government has announced a major funding allocation to disability services,



which provides a strong beginning to improving services to families and individuals coping with disability in that State. However, in South Australia there is still concern about the increase in demand for services that is not being met by increased funding, and in Queensland there is concern being expressed by QCOSS that some people are being 'left behind' in the development of that State's housing and infrastructure. Meanwhile, in Victoria we have heard of the Child Protection Hotline service being unanswered for some five hours, according to an ABC Stateline program, with allegations that the

Child Protection Service is understaffed by some 25% at any one time due to the difficulties in retention and recruiting of staff.

There are, of course, no easy answers to any of these issues, though one wonders if we are losing ground in part due to features of the ideological regimes that underpin funding of such services. I wonder what we are learning from our data bases in terms of understanding of social needs and issues for children and families? Are our various levels of accountability doing more than 'cover' for the risks inevitably involved in the delivery of services? Have we seen sufficient result from consultancies and reviews of programs? And how long do we wait before deciding that there are more deeply embedded, systemic problems to be addressed?

On a more positive note, there are many achievements to be celebrated. The Child, Youth and Families Act 2005 ([www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au/ecec/library/legislation](http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au/ecec/library/legislation)) came into effect on 23<sup>rd</sup> April with a number of changes that workers in the sector have welcomed. A number of the specific initiatives of this Act are outlined in the Report titled: *Promoting High Quality Community Services for Children, Youth and Families* (January 2007) which can be found at [http://wcm-cache.dhs.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/32995/ecec\\_promoting\\_high\\_quality\\_community\\_services.pdf](http://wcm-cache.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/32995/ecec_promoting_high_quality_community_services.pdf).

Much of the Victorian approach relies on raising service quality through partnerships with a focus on registration of community services. Safety, stability and development are core components of this approach with the Act seeking to further the focus on 'best interests' of children and young people in order to achieve the safety, health, learning, development and well-being outcomes for children outlined in the *Outcomes Framework for Victoria's Children*.

As this Edition of *Children Australia* goes to print, Australia has also celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 Referendum that resulted both in Indigenous Australians being acknowledged as citizens by being included in the census, and in the Commonwealth Government being given the power to make laws for Indigenous people. However, the health status of Australia's Aboriginal people still continues to be alarming as are the inequities they continue to

experience. It is fitting, then, that we are able to include two articles that address the issues of Indigenous children and carers. However, first up, we have published Freda Briggs' Address to the First World Scientific Congress of Sexual Health held in April this year. In this Address we are confronted by the realities of how children who are victims of sexual abuse are dealt with in Australia. Clearly, we have a long way to go to prevent the added emotional abuse caused through the clumsiness and inappropriateness of our legal systems, and Freda's perspectives are challenging and a call to action.

The first of the papers concerning Indigenous children is by Patricia Elarde and Clare Tilbury who conducted research into the support needs of Indigenous carers. As they aptly point out, much child welfare research does not differentiate between the needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous clients and/or does not specifically address issues concerning Indigenous children, families and communities. Given this situation, evidence used in practice is not informed by Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. The paper explores the support needs of Indigenous carers in the context of the increasingly detailed regulatory framework for out-of-home care, suggesting there should be more investment in ongoing support for carers and more personal contact between the statutory department and the carer/s after the placement is made. A clear message for governments is that it is important to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities when developing, designing and implementing strategies for culturally appropriate services in child protection.

The second paper by Anthony McMahon, Lucinda Reck and Malcolm Walker reports on a study that seeks to define social, cultural and spiritual well-being indicators for Indigenous children in care. The study involved the participation of Indigenous child protection workers and foster carers in order to examine a series of strategic change indicators that address Indigenous concerns about the social, cultural and spiritual development of Indigenous children in care. The paper concludes that 'physical and emotional health exists only within a cultural community' that must be

given due regard in protective interventions by incorporating social, cultural and spiritual strategic change indicators.

It is timely that the comparative study concerning Looking After Children by Deirdre Cheers, Kathleen Kufeldt, Ross Klein and Scott Rideout is included in this Edition. The LAC system is currently used in a number of countries world-wide and this provides increasing opportunities for international research collaboration. This paper describes early results of one such collaborative effort between Canada and Australia. One of the strengths of the LAC system is the capacity to connect research, policy and practice. In practice LAC measures and enhances outcomes of care, while the aggregation of data collected via the use of LAC allows policy makers to assess current practices in order to monitor and measure the extent to which intended program goals are achieved. Though the results of this comparative study are preliminary, they are nevertheless important, and we look forward to the next stage of reporting on outcomes.

To conclude this Edition, we have included a paper by Patricia Hansen and Frank Ainsworth on a topic related to children who receive inadequate care and protection. This article addresses the ongoing problem of parent blaming which frequently surfaces in the process of working with disadvantaged families. As the authors state, 'Parent blaming is not a new phenomenon although currently it seems to be in vogue among practitioners ...'. It is important to remember that parents experiencing poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment, social isolation and prejudice can be doubly disadvantaged by situations in which workers attribute blame.

And, finally, our congratulations to Di O'Neil, OAM – the author of several articles published in this journal – who has been awarded the honour of being included in the Who's Who of Australian Women 2007 – a publication described as embracing 'the journey of dynamic and outstanding women who have significantly impacted Australian society'.

Jennifer Lehmann

## States and Territories Update

### NSW

The Department of Community Services has an Expression of Interest (EOI) in relation to the redevelopment of out-of-home care services. The EOI can be viewed on the Department's website <[www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)> (follow link to Out-of-home care funding rollout and EOI).

The website also contains a number of papers that are linked to the EOI relating to various models of care, i.e. foster care, intensive foster care, residential care, supported family group homes, wraparound services and family preservation/individual support.

Frank Ainsworth

**Children Australia** is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, we now include a symbol at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article