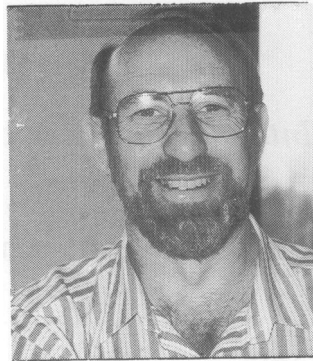


Editorial

This second issue in the International Year of the Family finds us wondering still about the Nation's grasp on its preferred place in the world, and whether the wide-ranging restructuring of economic affairs and so many of our industries and institutions is securing a decent future for our children. The vituperous throw-away lines of our political leaders and would-be leaders provide little illumination, being largely bedded in blind partisanship or competition for popular support, beside remarkable commonality in their general direction. The batch of daily and quarterly economic indicators are a mystery to many, and seem to provide little enlightenment except for those geared to making overnight gains and avoiding overnight losses on global money markets. We wonder and wait for all these activities to translate into an aggregate of gain for the long-term benefit of the children of Australia and the world. It seems likely that something much more active, in the way of social policy, than reliance on a 'trickle down', is necessary. We would welcome contributions from readers who can see what is or what should be emerging.

What should those of us who make a business or pastime of advocating or caring for children do, while we wait for the macro economic markets and the micro economic reforms to deliver the kind of world we want to live in. Should we be applying to the industry of social and community services, the tenets of our current business and public sector, which were succinctly expressed recently in a radio interview with Ivan Deveson, the notable business leader. Rationalisation, mechanisation, and reach for the world's best practice, he seemed to be saying, were the factors likely to enable Australia to make its way in the world. One should add that consumer satisfaction and welfare safety nets are acknowledged as important parts of the picture. All are concepts needing healthy examination, debate and elucidation.

There is no doubt that the first of these factors is being applied to social and community services with considerable vigour from outside, and also from within the myriad of organisations involved in the industry. Like all of the other industries, it is engaged in mergers, consolidation, budget cutting, downsizing, developing flat structures, zero based budgeting and trying to achieve more with less. In many instances, assets are being converted into cash flow or debt retirement, and



much soul searching is going on concerning the monetary value to be attached to services which might be commercialised, privatised, reprivatised to the responsibility of the family under 'user pays' principles, or, which may alternatively be assigned to a philanthropically-based 'not for profit' sector. The latter may be in or out of partnership with government or business. Government and non-profit service provider partnerships had become a traditional form of service delivery in Australia in federal, state and local government programs. New forms of partnership, involving cost sharing, cost containment or cost reduction are being sought. Increasingly, corporate sponsorships of welfare programs are being seen as an appropriate mechanism, whether seen as corporate citizenship, part of taxation management or, as in the case of work-based child care, part of a better work place.

Likewise mechanisation is rapidly penetrating the field. Meetings of the leaders of care givers rarely pass without a beeper or cellular phone asserting its presence. Most agencies now use computers. At least two major software packages for managing client and service information have been privately developed within the industry in Australia, CSMIS, by Human Services Computing, and a range of programs by KC Stats. Many agencies are using home grown data bases. Most federal and state programs are highly computerised, for management reporting, and to some extent, for case management. The field is increasingly seeking computer literate workers, who are rapidly becoming easier to find as the generation who received computer education in pre-school, school and often at home, move into employment. To a small degree, welfare academics are trying to come to grips with the ethics and human impact questions around these developments. E-mail traffic and electronic bulletin boards are part of the daily fare of many, and many can now examine the holdings of libraries anywhere in the world without leaving their study.

What of world best practice in this industry? To what extent do we pursue world best practice in the care and socialisation of our children? What does world best practice mean in the business of providing a safe, supportive and responsive environment in which growth, maturation and learning can occur? How are we doing at achieving best practice in the processes of conflict resolution and restoration after disaster and calamity?

What are best practices in eschewing and eliminating exploitation without eliminating opportunity? Surely such things are imperatives for the nineties, yet they do not seem to rank highly as a form of financial investment, as topics for serious well-funded research, or as well resourced and evaluated programs. Activity results more often as a reaction to scandal or calamity or short run ideological or pragmatic political objectives.

Many of these questions are closely connected to the use of ethics and principles or conventions, themselves often products of socialisations, in the exercise of power. One place in which noble sentiments find expression is in the Conventions of the United Nations, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These may be reinforced by collective accountability, legislative fiat or democratic processes. Or they may go terribly awry, or be crushed when some forms of dehumanising madness achieve temporary legitimacy. Nonetheless there is a need to develop policy, research and planning processes directed to achieving a safer more satisfying world wherever people are, whatever their problem might be. Urgent action is needed locally and globally and capitalising on this family-focused year is a good place to begin. At both levels, making home a safe place for children and their families would be a useful aim.

Internationally, the members of the security council need to examine their own gun running practices with the third world, and learn how to make their armies and police forces good at 'Blue Beret' operations - a challenge at least as difficult, if not more so, than conducting an aggressive war. Global traders need to find ways of doing business which reduce the inequalities and exploitative practices common in the market place of today. Tariffs and sanctions are difficult tools to manage, as is corruption and excessive bureaucracy. Ways must be found to stop genocidal practices, and best practice in creating safe places needs to replace sad spectacles such as those now being witnessed in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and so many other places. How difficult the world community found it to react to the pleas of the UN Secretary General. Ten thousand refugees are being created daily, say news bulletins of a recent UNHCR report, while another report points to the absurdities of military spending relative to social need in many developing countries. (*The Age* 11/11/93 and 13/6/94). As well, hundreds of thousands of workers from poor countries are flocking as labour migrants to richer countries, often to work under conditions which the local citizenry would not tolerate. There are echoes of the same dynamics at work in the Australian work force. Is this an appropriate aim or should opportunities at home be a major focus of concern? It seems that some self interest is entering the equation, with growing reactions to asylum seekers in many of the receiving countries who are becoming concerned about the flood, and so are tightening their borders and entry requirements. The World Summit for Social Development, to be held in Denmark in March 1995, will, we hope, provide a useful platform for attention to these vexing concerns.

Nationally, Australia has taken some tentative steps toward recognising the social and economic importance of home-based caregiving. Those fundamental questions of land ownership and use have been brought into the spotlight with the Native Title Act, which came into force in January 1994. Through *Working Nation - The White Paper on Employment and Growth*, some thoughtful,

though tentative, Public Policy steps have been taken in the direction of connecting a wealth of wasting talent, particularly of the young excluded and the experienced but retrenched, to some of the needs begging to be addressed. Will this take us far enough? Surely we cannot afford to waste any of that talent in such a hurting world. Again challenges are presented around the question of resource distribution to support these efforts. Challenges also abound in the fields of traditional concern to this journal. The question of what is the achievable and necessary range and mix of service forms for children and families in acute or chronic distress. Resource cuts are challenging residential or group care, and in some places, a major push is under way to test innovative forms of family based care. Implicitly, this raises other questions about models of service delivery, competence in practice and standards of service quality. Some of these developments and questions are canvassed in the articles presented in this issue.

A report is included on steps being taken to recognise, and include in a major way for the first time in Australia, the knowledge and experience of the critical reference group in child welfare. An Australia-wide network of children and young people in out-of-home care (AAYPIC) has been formed. There are groups being established in most States and Territories. Jan Owen, the National Co-ordinator, describes these welcome developments. To quote her, 'we need to ensure that the best practice today is the minimum standard of tomorrow.' Given the ongoing interest in family preservation programs, a report has been included from Lynda Campbell on the evaluation of the Families First Pilot Program established in Victoria. This topic is continued with another informative article about the nature of family preservation programs by Dorothy Scott. In a timely article, which picks up one of the fundamentally difficult issues with out-of-home care, Cas O'Neill in 'To attach or not: the burning question', tackles questions of commitment and attachment. Also timely, given shifting approaches to the funding and provision of services, is Frank Ainsworth's contribution concerning contracting arrangements in children's services. Adding to the discussion of practice competency, Elisabeth Starbuck reports on some research which has bearing on the management of that exploding part of the field, responding to reports of child abuse and neglect. Hopefully, the discussion of how to approach competent practice in our challenging fields will help in the quest for best practice. There appears though, to be an important need to examine the models of child protection developing around Australia. There is a great danger of all the energy and resources being consumed by investigatory and court processes which may not succeed in achieving restorative outcomes for children. Further contributions would be welcome on this issue.

As usual, there are book reviews, including a review of the Endeavour Program resource kit for group work with 'at risk' families which is being released by Centacare from Tasmania. Chris Goddard's contribution this time tells of another instance of a parent's struggle against bureaucracy and misguided loyalties, in supporting her child following abuse by a teacher at school. ♦

Lloyd Owen