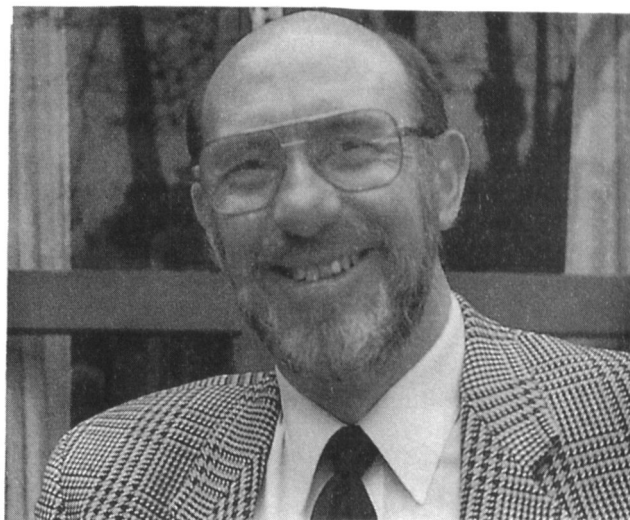


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

So it is the International Year of the Oceans and just now I feel a bit like a cork bobbing on it. The depth, the power, the importance and the, as yet, many unknowns of the ocean do perhaps provide a useful analogy for the global social and economic circumstances of the later nineties. In recent years the light has dawned that marine ecosystems are also fragile, needing to be treated with respect if they are to survive with the beauty and benefits often taken for granted. From the coloured polyps in the coral of the Great Barrier Reef to issues of climatic impact, the mind is thrown from micro to macro and back again. As we contemplate policy settings predicated on competition in market places, we wonder about the efficiency of tendering processes consuming our time and the time of those operating the process and we also wonder about the short, medium and long run social effects of things like the International Monetary Fund conditions applied to our neighbour Indonesia. How much and what form of intervention by who stands a chance of making this world a better and safer place for our children.

Some recent events have heightened my need for reflection, such as the sudden loss of Harry McGurk, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies after heart surgery. Harry was a man who clearly saw the importance of good research in the field of child and family welfare if sensible policy is to be made and who worked energetically to overcome the abysmal lack of it in this country. Sadly he has gone, just at a time when governments appear to have discovered the importance of investing some money in research in this area. He has however put in place some longitudinal strands which promise very useful returns for the future. My most recent contact with Harry was in the context of a tender briefing for one of the many projects currently being advertised. He took me aside afterwards to check my perception of some of the dynamics let loose in the competitive environment, which overlays the already sensitive and highly politicised fields of child protection and child, youth and family welfare. There was never any doubt that a driving force for him was a sense of fairness especially for vulnerable and disadvantaged people. Since then, among a variety of other imperatives, much attention and time has been consumed by tender processes. So much so that last week, after abandoning at 4 am another attempt to meet a deadline for a project which would have been dear to my heart, I found myself reframing the lecture to be delivered to

social work students later in the day as 'a tender tale' or 'a tale of two tenders'. This however is dicey ground as the competitive processes often throw up 'commercial in confidence' strictures. It seems we may still have much to learn about how to improve our knowledge and how to place the best of our knowledge at the service of practitioners and clients in the field.

One early legacy Harry left for me was an opportunity to listen to a research exemplar from the United States, James Garbarino, speak about material drawn from his recent work which goes under the title of *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*. Typically, he spoke about conditions conducive to socially healthier outcomes for children while pointing up how many of the products of social and economic policy and prevailing adult attitudes to date are making it harder for children to safely reach satisfying adulthoods. He spoke of the importance of stability and security in the nurturing environment of children and the significance of parenting and child rearing functions supported by the wider social group; how human evolution has produced a fairly long period within which attitudes to life and the future develop and how these adult buffers and modellers are not managing to keep fear within limits and avoid 'terminal thinking', expectations of calamity or limited future. He spoke of the importance of affirmation and the destructive effects of rejection including the role of 'isms' in creating shame. Ecological ideas point up the importance of small interpersonal settings which engender participation and responsibility. Interestingly policy makers have ignored the research on smaller school settings and have focused on the lack of difference found in schools above 500, above the threshold for making a difference. Attention is also drawn to the significance of providing time for socialising experiences, time for interaction between children and adults. Modern life has imposed startling reductions on this variable. Garbarino also talked of the significance of having 'a good home for the human spirit' as opposed to shallow materialism and the 'disposable culture'. This is not unrelated to research clearly demonstrating the pathogenic effects of inequality which as it continues to worsen runs counter to values of social responsibility, social justice and the protection of basic human rights. Worse still, at a societal level, as social pathology increases economic growth, we have the perversity of encouraging some ills, such as uninhibited aggression,

other mental health problems and environmental unsustainability, to critical mass of epidemic proportions. The book sounds like it is worth reading, especially noting Garbarino's well established evidence-based approach to his work. Sarah Wise from AIFS has read it and a review is included in this issue.

Garbarino was on his way to the New South Wales Child Protection Council Conference, one of the many happening in this part of the world this year. There, he was warning that some video games mimic military training programs designed to desensitise people so they are not afraid to kill (Sally Loane, *The Age*, 8 May 1998). Children collect behavioural baggage from many sources, some of which adds to the struggle of families and the care system to manage the challenging and high risk behaviour of some children and young people. As we write CAFWAQ is holding a conference, 'Advocacy and Activism -The Challenge of Challenging Behaviours'. Hopefully this and initiatives such as the Victorian High Risk Adolescent Project and the National Practice Exchange planned by CAFWAA for November will lead to useful policies and strategies. That the views and concerns of young people are significant was made clear at the 'Youth '98 Conference - Public Space, Public Voices' and 'Kids First Agenda for Change' both held in April. Yet to come is the ACWA Conference in NSW in August. Following is the ISPCAN Conference in Auckland (6-9 September) and the AIFS 'Changing Families - Challenging Futures' Conference in Melbourne (25-27 November).

In this issue, we have published Dorothy Scott's keynote address from last year's Child Abuse and Neglect Conference in Adelaide. It blends history and contemporary issues to provide a useful backdrop for policy.

Other contributors to this issue provide some food for thought as usual for the Australian scene. Sarah Stott from Gippsland Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) provides a very important reminder that our construction of events and the players can easily leave important elements out. She invites our discovery of non-offending fathers in sexual abuse cases. Acknowledgment of their pain, recognition of their roles and a response to their need for support will help in managing the family trauma and the healing of their children. Help where healing cannot be assured is the subject of the next article. Barbara Szwarc reports on a support program for families who have a child with a life-threatening illness. Her survey of users of services from the agency *Very Special Kids* allowed her to tap a number of issues of concern. These included a shortfall of services, a lack of some forms of service and a lack of access to information about services. Some disadvantage for non-metropolitan families was shown and some problems of cost. A need for community education about the extraordinary issues facing these families clearly exists if we aspire to a caring society.

Mary Hood has researched a sample of 500 child abuse cases referred to the Women's and Children's Hospital in

Adelaide. Attending to markers of poverty, unemployment and family disruption, she makes an argument for policy makers and practitioners to keep an eye on structural issues and their often complex and compounding inter-relationships. She indicates a need for gathering information about these things. She points to a need for closer connections between areas of Commonwealth and State responsibility. Less victim blaming and more prevention are warranted both in the present and in the inter-generational sense. In pointing to the need for more good, affordable, accredited childcare, she strikes a note which appears to be slipping out of harmony with more recent policies. Of course it is argued that the change is in process rather than effect. Some convincing is needed that contemporary policies are capable of delivering an equitable rather than a divided society. Failure, it seems from this research, may produce more child abuse.

Philip Mendes has provided an article which resonates with contemporary policy directions. The power of the consumer and consumer advocate in the market place is one device for ensuring quality of service and accountability in less regulated and more competitive environments. A possible antidote for systems abuse emerges as children and young people in care, carers and parents become organised and begin speaking. The record to date shows considerable promise as well as a few problems. The case is made for more formal and active recognition of the value of such groups in the emerging environment of outsourced services. Accountability is also potentially served by the evaluation industry. Program evaluation is now part of the everyday world. How to do it in human services though is not always so clear. Frank Ainsworth shares his experience in a 'how to do it way'. His article is likely to be helpful for most purposes while recognising the political nature of the subject and a now considerable array of approaches and methodologies in the evaluation literature. Some other recent and interesting additions we have come across recently are Yoland Wadsworth's *Everyday Evaluation on the Run* in a new second edition (1997 Allen and Unwin), Colin Sharp's *START Do-It-Yourself Evaluation Manual* 1996 produced with the Australian Youth Foundation, and one from England by Angela Everitt and Pauline Hardiker, *Evaluating for Good Practice* (1996 MacMillan). It is now accepted that most program evaluations warrant qualitative and quantitative inputs and stakeholder participation. The value base and purpose is also significant and a touch of post-modernism can usefully direct us to considering the power elements marked or masked in the discourse.

Chris Goddard, as a potential castaway, appears to reflect on literary taste. In fact he gives pause to reflect on how well or how poorly the written word allows us to understand the ideas and experiences of others.

Lloyd Owen