

## OBITUARY

**Dr. Leonard James Tierney, O.A.M.**

5 May 1925 - 14 April 1996

*I had been in the field only 4 or 5 years when I decided to commit myself to neglected and deprived children. Their needs are great and the results of good work are not only beneficial but clear cut.*

*Social Work Practice Research: A Personal Voyage of Discovery* by Dr. L.J. Tierney, Feb. 1996

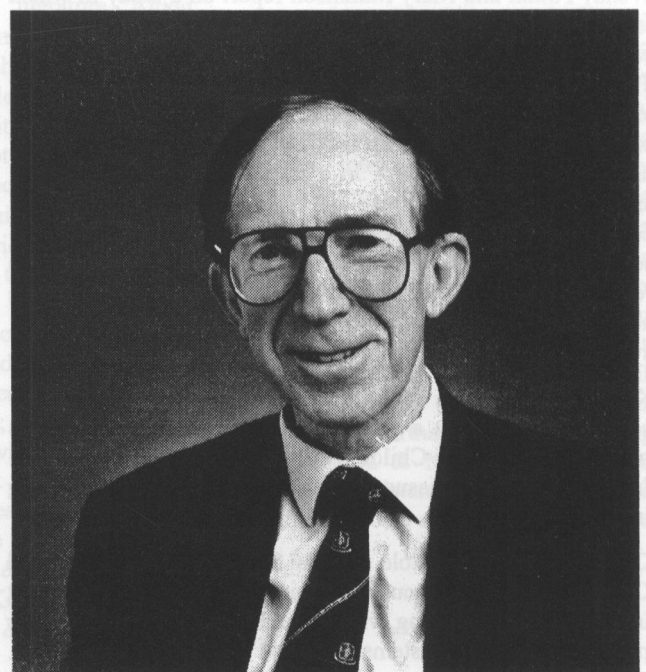
Len Tierney, an internationally recognised stalwart of child welfare practice and research and of social work education, has died. He leaves an unended quest for better ways of understanding the family life of the most disadvantaged children in the community, a commitment to high standards of practice in child and family services, a firm belief in the value and achievability of practice-based research, and a new generation of practitioners who share these commitments.

Len was born in the Mallee, one of several children of a soldier settler farmer who was widowed early. This experience of tough rural life engendered in Len a respect for family values and stamina, and for civic life, that informed much of his later work. Leaving home at twelve to take up scholarships at Birchip Higher Elementary School and then at Melbourne Boys High School, Len pursued an independent and largely self-financed road to higher education that culminated in 1974 with a Doctorate of Social Work at the prestigious Columbia University in New York. Along the way he gathered rich life experiences, beginning with days out at the races with fellow residents from the city working men's boarding house where he stayed as a schoolboy away from home. Len's first job as a social worker, in 1947, was at the R.S.L. Family Welfare Bureau, working first with homeless diggers and then with soldiers' families. When he moved on to Columbia University in 1951 to undertake an M.S.W., he supported himself (and his young family) through a position as a cottage parent to a group of 11 disturbed boys in New York State. Len often spoke of this experience, and what it taught him about children's needs for structure and containment, for attention, for affection, for formal education, and for help in learning the tools of social intercourse to help in tackling the adult world. For Len, thinking ecologically and culturally became second nature, and his special sensitivity to male socialisation has often provided an important balance in practice and research in a female-heavy profession.

From the mid-fifties Len spent several years as a research consultant to a combined project of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Citizen's Welfare Service and the Victorian Housing Commission that involved the relocation of families from an inner city temporary housing camp to an outer suburban housing estate. This work became the focus of his subsequent Doctoral dissertation, *Excluded Families*. In this thesis, in which the day to day struggles and achievements of the families are presented with warmth and compassion, Len reconceptualised the 'multiproblem family' as the 'excluded family', excluded from the formal and informal structures and processes that enable most of us to participate in social life as full citizens. Like all his subsequent

theorising, his ideas were derived inductively from the data of practice, from the real lives of families caught up with the systems of care and regulation. In 1963 Len published *Children Who Need Help*, a study of over 1000 children in care in Victoria – in institutions, discharged from institutions, placed for adoption or in foster care. In this study, he drew a sharp contrast between children whose parents or relatives had planfully placed them for adoption or in temporary care, and those whose parents did not propose plans and for whom the State, too, lacked planning.

These twin passions for attempting to understand families at the margin of society, and for attending to the futures of children who could not be sustained in their own families, were revisited and extended in many subsequent research projects, in teaching, and in his consultancy work with many child care and family service agencies. Len took a special interest in the non-government agencies (such as those run by the Christian Brothers, Inner East Foster Care, and St. Anthony's Family Services), valuing them as an expression of civic responsibility and as a voice at a remove from government. He often went into bat for them and assisted with program developments in foster care, residential care, family support, volunteer services and, most recently, intensive family based services. His list of projects, reports and community memberships is long.



The School of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, where Len undertook his initial Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Social Studies (1948), was his professional base from the early 1960s, after several years of study and visiting scholarship in the U.S.A. and the U.K. He became Reader-in-Charge in 1964, continuing in this position until the mid-1970s and thereafter acting as head of Department for protracted periods on several occasions until his retirement in 1991, when he continued to maintain an active presence as a senior research associate. As Head, Len linked staff and students with leading international schools and scholars, encouraging international travel, exchange and joint scholarship. While he was often heard to say one should 'stick to the knitting' in choosing a research focus, he was open to the possibility of many patterns. Len's contribution to social work education was long-sighted and diverse. He taught in many subjects of the Diploma and then Bachelor of Social Work, spanning policy, administration, research and practice in casework and in community development. His special love was a child and family elective subject, that provided a firm foundation for many new graduates entering the child welfare field.

Len pioneered post-graduate social work education in Australia, and in 1976 he was foundation chairman to the graduate studies program at the Melbourne University social work department. He insisted that theories of the family and theories of organisation be included as crucial building blocks for advanced practitioners. His many post-graduate students, now themselves social work educators, administrators, researchers and senior practitioners,

remember with gratitude his endless encouragement and patience along with incisive criticism. He also gave access to the resources of his own wide reading and experience and his extensive library, built on his love of history, philosophy and literature, as well as social work. He stimulated his students with his capacity to appreciate the minute details of the day to day rhythms of a child and family, while also seeing the broad context of the society and the times in which we live. They will not forget the tension of the thoughtful silence, or the rather wicked glint his eye as he challenged the would-be pundit to produce evidence, think more deeply, or follow up a lateral line of enquiry. For Len, scholarship about troubled children and their families was too important for woolly thinking.

In the last three years, in the face of debilitating illnesses, Len fought to maintain his family, social and intellectual life. As always, his tenacity was formidable, his wit ready, his memory astounding, and his commitment to social work and child welfare intact. Only days before his death, he left hospital to participate in the graduation ceremony of two of his Ph.D. students of child welfare. The field has lost a great friend and mentor.

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## Editorial (continued from page 2)

emotions – sexuality, sexual abuse, family form and function, the chronic illness of children. Broadly, they go to the edge and beyond our comfort zones. They open up questions in areas in which we would prefer to feel settled.

Wendy Patton and Mary Mannison report on a study in which tertiary students were asked about unwanted sexual experiences which occurred while they were under thirteen years of age. Their study design extends the range of behaviours under examination with a view to exploring the notion of a continuum of sexual experiences which may be unwanted and which may have a longer-term impact. In spite of the prominence of sex and sexuality in the popular press, well-supported and considered viewpoints about the effects of events on psycho-sexual development still appear to be needed. Approaches to responding to the offender have only recently begun to be addressed in this country in a programmatic way in correctional systems.

Karen Flanagan and Janet Patterson have been engaged for some time now with a program for adolescent sex offenders operating through the Children's Protection Society in Victoria. In an article for this issue they share some insights on sibling incest.

Cas O'Neill, Julie Contole, Robyne Schwartz, Doug Bryan and Christine Minogue focus in their article on a significant institutional shortcoming which could easily become a greater problem as health systems move to streamline throughput.

Chronic illness and disability in children challenge health systems which like to get people better and which are geared to the acute. Their exploration of the literature points to risks and gaps which care providers need to recognise and address when working with each other, the child and the family in partnerships to deal with the long haul.

Karen Healy and contributors from the support group, *Young Mothers for Young Women*, challenge stereotypical views of coping capacity and outcomes of early motherhood. Their article raises both pragmatics and principles for supporting caregiving roles in our community.

The need for discussion and careful examination of attitudes which can be woven into political processes also emerges in the article by Philip Mendes. Hopefully the ideas which translate to policy and practice will be those resting on the best available evidence.

Additional items in this issue of *Children Australia* include some notes for guidance in the territory of avoiding paedophilia in the child care field and reviews of two books which present survivor perspectives of child sexual abuse. Chris Goddard provides some experience and his views of print media activity and child abuse.

Lloyd Owen