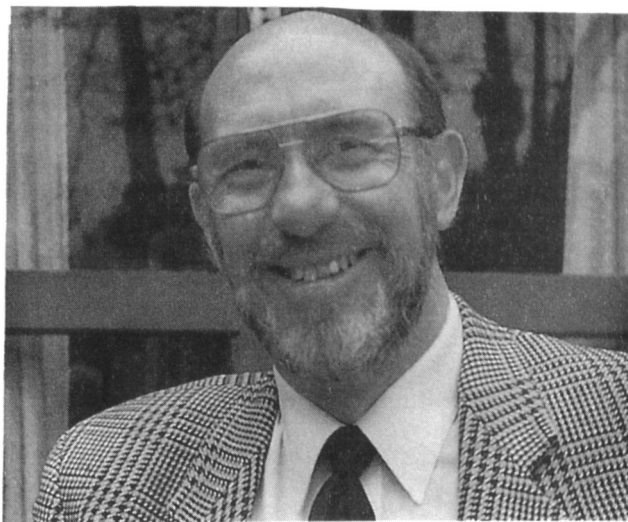


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

As this issue goes to press toward the end of 1997 I find myself preoccupied with the question of research as an aid to policy making and practice. The theme is implicit in the aims and content of the national CAFWAA/CWAV Conference. Entitled The 'Cutting Edge', we are being invited to identify innovation and the evidence in support of its value. At this, as was apparent at the recent Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference, more Australian research appears to be getting commissioned and getting done. Although nowhere near enough, far behind the volume apparent in Europe and North America and meagre in terms of resources beside expectations, it is beginning to serve some very important ends.

Firstly, qualitative research and participatory action research approaches are beginning to give consumer groups and disadvantaged groups a voice. The voices and the stories they tell are now greatly amplified by the power of print and electronic media. This must lead to questioning of some dysfunctional practice and some appreciation of the things that those on the receiving end of intervention and services in the child, youth and family welfare system find helpful and conducive to better outcomes. One cannot read Jan Owen's book from AAYPIC, *Every Childhood Lasts a Lifetime*, with its fifteen accounts from young people about their experiences in and out of family and in and out of care, without feeling moved to do something about our systems.

Secondly, there have been some significant advances in the realm of methodologies which mix qualitative and quantitative research techniques. When aided by the capacity of computers to store and rapidly process large quantities of data, programs have been developed which facilitate the manipulation of both narrative and numbers for both thematic and statistical analysis. Transnational surveys, longitudinal studies and meta-analysis of evaluation research are delivering good results in overseas work and are beginning to be picked up here with great potential. The natural laboratory for comparative research across our eight States and Territories has rarely been used to date. National campaigns and national bodies like AIFS, AIHW and AIC are producing useful material, but more effort and research resources are needed to take advantage of these new opportunities.

Thirdly, the extreme obsession with dollars and getting more for less, coupled with the heightened accountabilities driven by both concern for rights and standards and publicised sad events and scandals (and the ensuing inquiries) produce research of the monitoring and evaluation kind. The ubiquitous drive for restructuring and redevelopment which appears to be part of the nineties culture, and the relentless pursuit of small government and business style public administration, may have heightened the demand of some new players to know what needs to be done. It has sometimes sparked research, perhaps as a reaction by some who feel the need to show more clearly what is or is not happening. The very contemporary report on children and the legal process, released after two years' work by the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, is an interesting example of research with a very public purpose. It points to serious problems demanding solutions.

How do we as a nation advance the solutions to persistent deficiencies in services for families in need and care systems for children and young people? There appears to be merit in attending to some of the underlying principles, then vigorously pursuing them. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and related international instruments provide some useful reference points, as do attempts to produce baseline standards such as those for out-of-home care. It is sometimes useful for important principles to be given the force of legislation though one should be wary of the idea that laws, pronouncements and court decisions will somehow be sufficient to fix things. Of greater importance, it seems, is the provision of real opportunities for attaining and maintaining a positive identity, and for leading a stimulating and reasonably satisfying lifestyle within a sufficiently secure environment. So much of this is dependent on the personal relationships we are given or can build, relationships requiring effort on someone's part and genuine concern to allow them to develop or make them happen.

One interesting example of program design and development using a research orientation to attempt to put into place legislated principle enshrined in the UK Children Act 1989, is the 'Looking After Children' system for case management, assessment, case planning and review for children in out-of-

home care. The system has been described in some detail in an earlier issue of this journal (Clare 1997). Dr Harriet Ward, who had much to do with its development, is visiting Australia in November, participating in visits and workshops at some of the sites where its potential is being explored here. I was fortunate in September to be able to attend an international seminar in Oxford in the UK, where about eighty researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a number of countries which are experimenting with LAC gathered to share ideas. The merits of the system appear to be its comprehensiveness; its concern with long term developmental outcomes achieved by attending to the day-to-day concerns and tasks which ordinary 'good enough' parents would address in caring for their children; its apparent cross cultural relevance; and, its potential as a tool for providing information for planning and decision making, program evaluation and ongoing research.

The Oxford visit provided an opportunity to locate the interest which has developed in LAC in Australia. Some of this built on the visit of LAC trainers, Hilary Corrick and Debbie Jones, toward the end of last year. We found a number of substantial affairs with LAC going on around Australia. Good case planning is a crucial concern given the complexity of service systems and the interests of the 15,000 young Australians in the present care system and those likely to follow. A decline in the numbers in care over two decades reversed three years ago, now amounting to roughly a thirty per cent increase. Residential care numbers have continued to reduce but there have been increases in foster care and kin care (Bath 1997). Many forms of primary, secondary and tertiary child and family welfare services exist in each jurisdiction but structural arrangements vary for service planning, coordination and delivery. Among the service systems in the eight Australian States and Territories, LAC projects have been found in six.

Western Australia had substantial trials in District Offices and non-government agencies. Following some government restructuring, decisions are pending on wider implementation. Findings from the pilots have been documented (Clare & Peerless 1996; Clare 1997:29-35). Barnardos in New South Wales has moved to full implementation of LAC for the children in their care. An independent three year evaluation by the University of New South Wales is being funded by the Australian Research Council. This project also has a site in the Australian Capital Territory (Tregeagle 1997; Fernandez & Voigt 1997: 9-23). A Victorian project is well into a 12 month pilot in the Eastern metropolitan region of Melbourne. It involves staff from the Victorian Department of Human Services and a number of non-government agencies under the auspice of the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria. The project, with financial support from the Stegley Foundation and DHS, is being led by Robin Clark from Deakin University and an independent evaluation is being conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies with funding from the Rotary Foundation. Some other agencies have experimented with LAC, and La Trobe University with support from the British Council and DHS initiated the training visit of Debbie and Hilary and the visit from Harriet Ward to explore further research possibilities. This also has the support of the South

Australian Department of Family and Community Services. A shift from public sector to non-government sector service delivery is occurring. LAC emerges as a possible contributor to standard setting and quality assurance. A partnership with Flinders University, where Jim Barber has also succeeded in obtaining an ARC grant, will extend the association of LAC with research and evaluation.

Overall the experience suggests that, apart from adjustments to align wording with local legislation, little change to the materials for cultural or other reasons has been found necessary. Some extension of kinship coverage may be applicable to application in some Aboriginal community settings (Clare & Peerless 1996:26). In the Northern Territory some preliminary work has been undertaken with communities in the Alice Springs area which supports that view while confirming the underlying relevance of the approach and endorsing its applicability for children with disabilities. Experience generally is congruent with the implementation issues encountered in the UK, pointing to the need for careful and well supported implementation processes. There are initial reactions and fears about complexity and work loads which are later overshadowed by positive responses from practitioners, care givers and young people that better quality information and positive caring processes lead to better planning and better outcomes.

Two young people with experience of the care system joined our discussions in Oxford, Louise from the UK and Danni from Australia. Both are on record with comments in support of the need for systems with the comprehensiveness and depth of LAC, recognising that this simply reflects what a diligent parent would want to do.

I was in care for ten years. Somewhere along the way they lost my real name and my birth certificate. This meant that I had no passport and no identity ... Do you need to ask me why I welcome this system? (Louise 1994).

I've read my file. It's 4,691 pages long. I got it when I was 21 through Freedom of Information. ... When I was eight years old I was classed as uncontrollable. This is the biggest thing for me. I often think about this and write about this in my diary. About the fact that I never fitted in anywhere. I was either too bad or too good. My file made me laugh a lot. Made me cry a lot too (Danni 1996).

In this issue of *Children Australia*, Sue Tregeagle, Amanda Cox and Louise Voigt take us also into thinking about normative standards of care in families. Frustrated by the difficulty of coming to grips with practice in this area at Barnardos in NSW and ACT, a series of workshops were held resulting in this paper intended as a guide for workers with responsibility in child protection. Also concerned with protective issues, Rosemary Sheehan reports on some research relating to mental health issues and decision making in the Victorian Children's Court. Judith Bessant and Richard Hil direct our thoughts toward systems failure and systems abuse while Frank Ainsworth reminds us of the macro impact of poverty on family functioning. Michael Lynch raises questions about how to prepare young people for the impact of changing society.

In all we have to acknowledge that the highly personal tasks associated with the bearing and raising of children are complex, demand dedication and skill and are very significant in their impact on the long-term sense of self and individual ability to manage the demands of adulthood. The coping efforts of individuals in turn impact on the society we all share. Failure of either personal parenting or publicly supported parenting can be costly in both social and economic terms. The search for the most effective ways to deal with external and internal forces impinging on good parenting should be supported. When the evidence is there that we have something which works, we should broadcast our knowledge and get on with using it for the children and young people of the day.

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