

Yesterday's dreams, today's realities

Keynote address at the 6th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

Dorothy Scott

This is an edited version of the keynote address given by Dr Dorothy Scott at the 6th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect – Dialogue, Dreaming, Decisions – which was held in Adelaide on 20-23 October 1997.

It is a great honour to be part of the opening of the 6th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect. Having been involved in the closing of the 5th Conference two years ago in Melbourne, I was asked to help make a bridge between them. While some issues come and go, there are those that endure. One such theme from the last conference was about sustaining hope within ourselves so that we might work better with families who have lost theirs. Another was about celebrating and disseminating the innovation which is occurring within our field and which rarely features on the front page of our newspapers about child abuse and neglect – space reserved for images of which I shall soon speak.

We also carry many evocative images from the last conference. One of these was a group of young people in care acting out with humour and poignancy, their experience of our system. Another image, one that I will never forget, is that of Archie Roach singing of his love for his baby son, a deeply moving experience. Archie's song, sung so lovingly, has an obvious significance in the light of our country's history of enforced separation of Aboriginal children from their parents, but it also has a universal message of the power of paternal love. Too often in our field we perceive fathers only as 'parasites' or 'perpetrators'. Let's make sure we don't lose sight of fathers in this conference.

We could trace the recent history of child abuse and neglect by looking at national and international conferences like this one, as they are links in the chain of the child rescue movement which began in the cities of the late

nineteenth century. Child abuse and neglect did not originate in the nineteenth century of course – from the beginning of human time some children have fared better than others in the lottery of parental love and protection. But increased social visibility and a new awareness in the nineteenth century led to a new response.

There is a long line of little known child welfare reformers in our history. One of the few who is well known is South Australia's Catherine Helen Spence, but she is generally known not for her child welfare reform but for her electoral reform and women's suffrage.

Catherine Helen Spence was a member of that remarkable small denomination of nineteenth century Unitarian social reformers, and she helped create the 'boarding out scheme', an early foster care program. It was a particularly progressive system, with regular visiting to support the children and the families and to ensure that all was well. It was probably the best model of foster care in the world at that time, providing children with a life outside the appalling institutions of the day in which so many children died.

With an historian colleague, Dr Shurlee Swain, I am currently involved in writing a centenary history of the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, now known as the Children's Protection Society, a leading agency in innovative programs and training today. It was established along the lines of the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children which was modelled on the New York Society, formed in the 1870s after the newspaper exposure of the case of Mary

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Ellen, a young girl badly beaten by her stepmother. From the very beginning of the child rescue movement, the media has played a central role. On one hand it has brought to the awareness of the community, the existence of the problem of child abuse and neglect. On the other hand, it has exploited the potential of child abuse for voyeuristic sensationalism and failed to grasp, let alone convey, the complexity of the issue. The role of the media will be one of the themes explored in this conference.

Child rescue agencies were not reluctant to exploit images of children in their publicity, just as some continue to do today. Here is the photograph which launched the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. This is Inspector Noble, the first 'cruelty man' as they were called in the slums, 'the welfare', as they were later to become known. With him is little Leslie whose stepmother had sent him out to beg for food. He and his younger sister were found foraging on a rubbish dump in Burnley, an inner Melbourne suburb, Leslie scraping jam from a discarded tin. He was rescued by Inspector Noble. But, you might wonder, what was a photographer doing there? In fact, the photograph was taken in a studio some time later, Leslie dressed up in his rags again and his face blackened to look the part for the camera. The photograph continued to be successfully used in the Society's appeals for many years.

By then Leslie was in a reformatory and at 20, he was transferred to a mental hospital, a fate shared by his younger sister. The photograph portrayed a simple image and the solution was child rescue. Behind this photograph is a complex phenomena which then, as now, defied simple solutions.

The trial of the parents in the Hawthorn Magistrates Court for wilfully, and without reasonable excuse, neglecting to provide adequate food and clothing for their two children, was reported in *The Herald*. The headline read 'CHILD LIFE FRAUGHT WITH HORROR, STARVED AND FILTHY, TWO LITTLE SUFFERERS, TWO PARENTS PROSECUTED'. The case was a complex one in which poverty was only one factor, but no mention of

which appeared in *The Herald* despite the 1890s witnessing the worst economic depression in the history of this country. For those of you familiar with *The Herald* today, you will observe that little has changed in its coverage of child abuse.

The Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children case records, which are believed to be the only intact case records of their kind in the world, are an historian's gold mine. Between the lines in ink of these evocative and at times, heart-rending documents, can be seen the emergence of fundamental ideas such as the child as a psychological being and the child as a holder of human rights. Historical shifts in implicit definitions of what is normative and deviant in the discipline of children can also be seen. So too can be seen the unfolding of new ways of seeing the problem – upon the moral foundation of the movement's founding mothers and fathers, were added psychological and sociological understandings.

How will historians at the end of the twenty-first century look back on the media coverage of child abuse in the late twentieth century? My guess is that they will see a close parallel with that which existed in the late nineteenth century.

In our own times we have witnessed the emergence of new trends in the child rescue movement or what we now call the child protection field: professionalisation; bureaucratisation and politicisation. I shall return later to these and argue that each is a double-edged sword in modern child protection systems.

But before I venture into the reality of today, I want you to come with me on a journey into the past. While Thomas Jefferson once said, 'I like the dreams of the future more than the history of the

past', the past is a place where you can sometimes find dreams, dreams that might take us to a better future.

One of yesterday's dreams was expressed in 1897, exactly 100 years ago at the Society's first AGM, by His Excellency the Governor of Victoria, Lord Brassey, whose wife, Lady Brassey, established the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

I venture to say that if as the years go on, the number of cases becomes less and less, it will perhaps be one of the best evidences that it was a good thing to establish the Society. It would show that it had done all that was necessary in acting as a deterrent to the ill treatment of children.

Sadly we know today's reality. Another of yesterday's dreams related to the goal of prevention. In the 1897 Annual Report of the VSPCC, the following excerpt from an address by the Rev Dr Marshall appears.

It should be recognised that the object for this Society is not merely to hunt about and find people that are ill-using children in order to punish them but also to adjust the home life where parents are handicapped by their circumstances. I do not believe the best work will be accomplished by taking extreme action against parents who do not look after their children, but by going to the parents in a kindly way and helping them realise their duty as parents, and by developing the parental instinct...

Our language may be a little different, but many of us here will recognise yesterday's dream as one we can still share today.

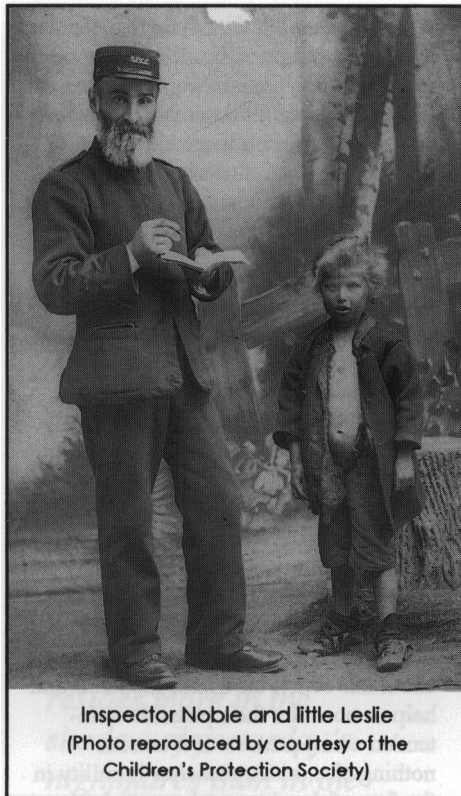
The turn of the century was an extraordinary time in the emergence of the child rescue movement. Boston historian, Larry Wolff, has written a stunning analysis of Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century in which he examined the press coverage of a series of murders of children who died at the hands of their parents, cases which shocked Viennese society to the core, just as recent revelations of child sexual abuse have shocked Australian society to the core.

Wolff quotes from Freud's correspondence and his scientific papers written at the time these sensational cases were commanding a high profile in the liberal newspapers read by Freud. He notes the complete absence of any mention of the cases by Freud, despite the insights which psychoanalytic theory might have offered in understanding the dark side of the parent-child relationship.

Wolff, as a postmodernist child of his times, is fascinated with the construction of the narratives of these child abuse cases, particularly in their dichotomy of good and evil. For example, there is little six year old Olga Keplinger, an illegitimate child whose body is found next to that of her mother in a murder-suicide scene set in the picturesque woods outside Vienna. In great detail the newspapers describe the scene of death, right down to the lace neatly placed by the mother to cover the bullet hole in the child's head.

The mother, Hedwig Keplinger, is described in detail and a picture of her as a beautiful, well-dressed young woman is painted. Her sad life is reconstructed with great sympathy and she is absolved of responsibility for the murder of her child, on the basis of the desperation and tragedy of her life – the life of a mistress exploited and spurned by the man whose photograph is found next to her body, with the words inscribed on its back, 'I have loved you until my unhappy end'. With considerable poetic licence, the case is transformed by the newspapers into a tragic Victorian tale, full of literary indulgence, with 'the pretty Fraulein Keplinger' a victim of seduction and society who could easily have been a character of Hardy or Dickens.

In great contrast is the case of little Anna Hummel, almost five and also illegitimate, beaten to death by her mother and stepfather, a day labourer who worked in a laundry. Anna, unlike Olga, is cast as the victim of parents portrayed as ugly, remorseless monsters of the lumpen proletariat. Remorselessness was a feature of the way the Viennese press portrayed the mothers in all the publicised child murders with the exception of Hela Keplinger. The courtroom scenes made especially good copy.



Inspector Noble and little Leslie
(Photo reproduced by courtesy of the
Children's Protection Society)

At the trial of Joseph and Juliane Hummel in Vienna in 1899, the crowd cheered as the death sentences were handed down. This was, according to the *Neue Freie Press*, 'an acclamation the like of which we cannot remember ever before at condemnation to death' (Wolff 1989, p.114).

Interestingly, notes Wolff, while the liberal press acknowledged the significance of the social context of poverty and deprivation in the Hummel case, the socialist newspaper, the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, declared that 'Such a deed is abominable, so inhuman, so contrary to all natural instincts, that one cannot explain it by any social oppression or other external circumstances' (Wolff 1989, p.69). A century later the debate on the link between poverty and child abuse continues, although the political positions are now reversed such that the social oppression argument is advanced by leftist liberals and the individual moral responsibility argument by social conservatives.

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Like the case of Olga Keplinger and her mother, we have seen several tragedies in Australia in the past year in which the parent's mental state and desperation has driven them to kill themselves and their children. Their intent is seen as a distorted act of mercy by a parent who believes they are protecting their children from the cruelty of their future in this world.

The callous and remorseless portrayal of Anna Hummel's mother and stepfather closely parallels the coverage of child abuse cases such as the murder of two year old Daniel Valerio in Victoria. It too led to literary indulgence, including Helen Garner's reconstruction entitled 'How We Lost Daniel's Life' in *Time* magazine. On the front cover was the heartrending picture of Daniel Valerio taken by the Police Surgeon just days before he died (*Time* magazine, March 8, 1993), and inside were caricatures of his mother and stepfather in court.

In the case of Jaidyn Leske, a little boy who disappeared one night this year in the Victorian country town of Moe and prompted the largest police search in the history of that state, who was responsible was less clear and the media turned to exposing how the lumpen proletariat live in the La Trobe Valley.

The recent counterparts in New Zealand, under *The Australian* newspaper's headline 'NZ REELS AT CHILD ABUSE HORRORS', reported on a highly publicised series of child abuse deaths, which exposed, in the words of the journalist 'the tangle of poverty and family dysfunction which blight the lives of people who seem to come from the script of the 1995 film 'Once Were Warriors''. The way in which the so-called underclass is described is reminiscent of how middle-class Victorian social observers wrote about the poor in *Deepest Darkest* England at the turn of last century, permeated with a sense of voyeuristic horror at how the other half live.

But the most vivid example of the cry of vengeance reverberating down the century is that of the media coverage in the trial of Lindy Chamberlain. Historians of the future will have some

interesting things to say about us in relation to the most famous Australian case of all – the believed to be infanticide by the seen to be remorseless mother, a sad saga immortalised on film by Meryl Streep.

And nearly always it is 'the other' – he who is 'a monster', the Moe or Maori underclass, or a strange religious 'sect'. Depravity and rage reside in the other, not within oneself or one's own social group. This, of course, performs a valuable social function, brilliantly identified by Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, at the turn of the century. In 1895 Durkheim argued that an essential social function was served by the deviant and that denouncing such deviance was necessary to define the boundaries of normative behaviour. Denouncing the deviant also serves the function of maintaining the boundary between in-groups and out-groups. And a Freudian would say that it allows us to project our own forbidden aggressive and sexual impulses on to others, while also deriving vicarious gratification through voyeuristic descriptions of their acts.

Larry Wolff does not report any child sexual abuse cases hitting the headlines in Vienna at the turn of the century, but there is no doubt they were there, largely unseen and unheard. But not to all eyes and ears. They were certainly heard by Freud as he listened to some of his women patients recount experiences of childhood sexual abuse.

But Sigmund Freud, who first made the link between the adult psychological trauma and childhood sexual abuse, was a century ahead of society in his recognition of the reality of childhood sexual abuse. His seduction theory was soon to be substituted with his theory of the child's Oedipal fantasies, thus denying the reality of child sexual abuse.

L.P. Hartley's opening line in the novel *The Go Between* is 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. In relation to child abuse and neglect, many things were not done that differently there.

The value in examining history is that it allows us to recognise that we often recycle the same solutions under a different name, and it is helpful to know

what happened in the past when we tried something similar. More importantly, history, like anthropology, can let us see the filters through which we see our own times, challenge its 'taken for granted' reality, let us stand outside ourselves for a moment or catch a reflection of our lens at the same time as we look through it.

A good historical understanding of the field of child abuse and neglect will enable us to see more readily the pendulum swings in policy and programs and the futility of simple solutions. It will help us see what can happen in the wake of moral panics. Most of all it can help us see that the best of intentions have paved the paths to some of our most appalling policies and practices, the consequences of which remained invisible to those at the time. This might make us a little more cautious about our own well-intentioned acts and help us consider their possible unintended consequences. If it teaches nothing else, history teaches humility in the face of deeply complex social problems which have been with us for a long time.

Conferences are always a window on their place and time. How will this conference come to be seen, and what place will it have in the history of the child rescue movement? I do not ask this question because of an inflated sense of our own importance. We can all be seduced by the narcissistic realisation that our present is tomorrow's past and gaze endlessly into the mirror, distracting ourselves from the task at hand. Our leaders often indulge in this. It was once said, and not in a flattering tone, that Sir Robert Menzies would go down in history as the Australian Prime Minister most concerned about how he would go down in history!

The reason I pose the question of how we might come to be seen is that it is a tool which might allow us to get outside our 'temperocentric' world and think about it in new ways, just like anthropology allows us to gaze at our own tribe in a new light. This thinking may enable us to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy in our field. It may even illuminate new paths forward.

A conference is a stage on which we give salience to some things over

others, at which we hear some voices rather than others. Conferences like this express what is going on in a field of human endeavour at a particular time and place. By reflecting on this, we are able to take stock of ourselves. This is not just a creation of the conference organisers who plan the program but what emerges spontaneously from the conference itself.

This was brought home to me most powerfully at the 1990 International Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Hamburg. It expressed the angst and the capacity characteristic of some of the German post-war generation to feel and to face the guilt of the Nazi legacy on behalf of their parents' and grandparents' generation.

In many ways that conference explored notions of guilt, and the complex relationship between past and present. Why would I want to talk about guilt and the complexity of the relationship between past and present? Because the time and place of this conference demands it. A conference on child abuse and neglect in Australia in 1997 must, either consciously or unconsciously, either directly or through its denial, deal with the legacy, personal and political, of what has been done in the name of child rescue.

As this conference unfolds, let us be aware of how we, individually as well as collectively, deal with these issues. In the light of some things done in the name of child rescue, my paper's title 'Yesterday's Dreams, Today's Realities' may be more aptly described as 'Yesterday's Nightmares, Today's Realities' or 'Yesterday's Reality, Today's Nightmare'. If we are to see the media as our mirror, albeit a mirror which distorts for effect, the most dominant images in very recent times have been of two kinds: the past removal and institutionalisation of large numbers of children, indigenous and non-indigenous; and the present failure to protect children from physical and sexual abuse.

As the community discovers the long-term consequences for many children and families caught up in the child welfare systems of the past, we begin to understand that their reality, as it is lived today, resides more in the shadow

of yesterday's nightmares than in the light of yesterday's dreams.

Among the most visible have been the experiences of vast numbers of Aboriginal children removed from their families; of vast numbers of non-Aboriginal wards of state who grew up in state-run or church-run institutions; and the child migrants from Britain, many of whom were transferred from children's homes in one country to those in another. It would be hard to give an accurate estimate of the numbers involved but in a period over several decades, it might be over 100,000 children.

It is hard to comprehend the magnitude of this. Only one generation ago, on a scale unknown before in our history, very large numbers of children were removed from their families and made wards of state, often to remain disconnected from their families throughout their childhood and into adulthood. In my own state of Victoria, if we go back just 30 years, we see in the mid-1960s, a tidal wave in the number of children in the care of the state. For example, in the year 1967, there were over 6000 children who were wards of state in Victoria alone – this is more than the total number of children in care in the UK today, with a population so much greater than that of Victoria then.

The picture varied from state to state in the balance between foster care and institutional care. In Victoria, most of the children in the 1960s were in institutional care, with nearly 3000 wards of state in church-run institutions. Many of them were removed from their families by the state. In the late 1960s, as a 17 year old, I was a childcare worker in the government institution to which these children were initially brought, mainly by police-women. I remember it as if it were yesterday. It is why I have ended up doing what I can in my life to prevent children suffering like that, just like many of you have made a similar commitment.

Most children were not forcibly removed from their families. They were placed there by parents who, for many reasons, could not care for them. In addition to the children who were wards, there were children placed by their parents in babies' homes for short

periods, as when a mother was hospitalised. Babies' homes, run by nurses on a model of a hospital, were seen to provide expert care. But Bowlby, in the 1950s, had shown just how damaging this form of care could be for a very young child.

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Today Victoria has approximately 2000 children under the guardianship of the Department, very few of whom are in institutional care and the majority of whom are in contact with, and likely to return to, their families. This is revolutionary change in one generation. Without doubt the policies and practices of the past, which resulted in children living apart from their families on this scale, was unjustified. Many of the children could have been reunited with their parents if policies and practices had encouraged rather than discouraged this. Had these families had the social security and family support services we now have, many children would have been able to stay with their families in the first place.

Each of these children, now adults, has their own story to tell. They include sad stories of subsequent imprisonment, alcoholism and mental illness. Not all of this can be attributed to being in care – many children were very damaged before they came into care, but the type of care offered did little to heal the wounds, and in some instances, created

more. They also include inspiring stories of remarkable resilience. Most, I imagine, are in the many shades between.

In recent times, one of the 6000 Victorian ex-wards of state from the 1960s, has spoken to me at length during long interstate telephone conversations. Leonie is a member of *Innovate*, a self-help group of ex-wards of state. I have never met Leonie but one day she and I may meet, and I hope that she will be a keynote speaker and that I shall be sitting in the audience listening to her.

Leonie grew up in a Catholic home for girls. On her wardship file is written 'slow but not mentally retarded' yet today, Leonie is a teacher of children with developmental delays. We expected little of these children, and gave them few educational opportunities. I am not sure how you would describe the relationship Leonie and I have. It is certainly not that of a social worker and client. It doesn't fit the usual categories but in a sense it is a teacher-student relationship.

She is the teacher. I am the student. Sometimes I even take notes as she talks, and with her permission, which she has also given to me for today's address, I read excerpts to my students in lectures – so they might glimpse the human face behind the figures.

But mostly I just listen and gaze out my windows, sometimes with tears in my eyes, not so much at her loss of family, as acute as that is, but in awe at her capacity to develop, under those childhood conditions, her ability for loving relationships and a depth of compassion for the suffering of others. Leonie says that her experience in institutional care is best described as 'emotional deprivation' not as 'abuse', and this is perhaps typical of most institutionalised children, although we should not assume that emotional deprivation is any less damaging.

She also describes the ripples, from the past to the present, which occur across the generations of a family in the wake of fractured relationships with parents and siblings which may never mend. For example, Leonie's children do not know their maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins and her little

seven year old daughter said to her recently, 'It feels strange to me that my Mum doesn't have a real Mum'. It is important that we listen to these stories for yesterday's reality lives on as today's reality for many. This chapter in our history is the 'unfinished business' of the child welfare system, and we have a deep moral obligation to respond.

To date our responses have been varied. Some state government departments and some religious organisations have been far ahead of others in providing financial support to self-help groups, giving ready access to their files, offering counselling as people work their way through these pages on which their painful past has been recorded, sometimes in such wounding words. Above all, some departments and non-government agencies have tried to acknowledge what has happened. I have just had the privilege of reading an example of this, and I was moved by the simplicity and the sincerity with which these nuns acknowledged the past and its pain. But I am saddened by the behaviour of other statutory authorities and religious bodies which have responded with denial, defensiveness and insensitivity. Perhaps those of us who work in organisations which had a part in this past can reflect over the next few days on how we might best respond.

When I listen to Leonie I am reminded that what ex-wards of state seek is similar to that which all humans seek. The American psychologist Richard Lazarus once said that we all face the same questions: 'Who am I? Where am I going? Do I matter?'. But there are other questions which come before these. Not long ago I was reading about a South Australian Aboriginal service which uses art as a source of healing. They pose certain questions to the people who come to them. At first these questions look similar to those of Lazarus but they are really fundamentally different from the individualistic assumptions of his questions. Before they ask people to think about 'Who am I?', they ask them to consider 'Where do I come from?' and 'Who do I belong to?'.
These questions, of course, have a special meaning for indigenous people,

but I think they have a meaning for all of us and they have a particularly poignant meaning for those who were disconnected from their families and their communities in childhood.

We have an obligation to assist the previous generations of children in the child welfare system to seek their answers to these questions. And we have an obligation to the current generation of children to help them find their answers to these questions too, because otherwise, they will not be able to constructively answer the questions 'Where am I going?' and 'Do I matter?'.

In the light of this past, it is hard not to adopt a 'black armband' history of child welfare, unless, of course, you happen to be wearing a white blindfold. There has been just too much pain for too many children and too many families for it to be otherwise. But a black armband history does not tell us how change occurred, and that is vital if we are to learn how to make change happen, a point to which I shall return in my concluding remarks.

Moreover, a black armband history can lead us to react so strongly against the practices of the past that we set in motion practices in the present which have unintended consequences. Professor Al Kahn, of Columbia University School of Social Work, once said that the history of child welfare is the history of one generation's solutions becoming the next generation's problems. There is more to the history of child welfare than this but it is clear that some of the previous generation's solutions have become our problems and the question is – will our solutions become the next generation's problems?

In some places, has the pendulum already swung too far the other way? Some would say, and with justification, that legislation based on the 'least restrictive option' and policies based on diversion, both aimed at keeping children out of the care of the state at all costs, are resulting in some children being left in jeopardy, and in others returning to families who cannot provide for their most basic needs. 'At all costs' is also an interesting term – 'what sort of cost and at cost to whom' one might ask, for the financial costs to the state in providing out of home care are very high, and the costs of a very

different kind to children, who may need but be denied this care, are also very high.

Deinstitutionalisation in this field, as in others, has come about by an, at times, unholy alliance between cost cutting administrators and humanitarian reformists. But was all institutional care bad? The evidence suggests not. And is a revolving door of broken foster placements, returning home and coming back into care, better? The research on attachments suggests not. Many people in the mental health and child welfare fields, who have a wealth of clinical experience with deprived children, believe that there are some children, such as those who have a history of broken placements and failed attempts at reunification with their families, who desperately need therapeutic residential care. They need the security and structure of an environment which does not make the same emotional demands for intimacy or reawaken the fear of abandonment as a foster family sometimes does. They need an environment which gives stability and sets external controls for children who have not internalised controls and who are afraid of their own destructive impulses. They need caregivers who will not be burned out by their home and workplace being one and the same, and who, after eight hours, can have some respite from some very difficult children. There is so little left of this form of care.

Paradoxically, in the name of children's rights, in some places we have come to see residential care as a punishment and to limit the period in which a child or adolescent can be held in such a setting to days or weeks, thus intensifying their insecurity and instability. This in itself can provoke, in vulnerable adolescents, a pattern of escalating self-harm or violent behaviour in a desperate attempt to get adults to contain them and meet their dependency needs. What they now need to do, to get a response from a *laissez-faire* form of *loco parentis*, is increasingly dangerous to themselves and others.

And the community has its limit of tolerance. If we don't respond, the mental health and the correctional systems will ultimately be forced to do so, and opportunities for earlier and

more effective interventions will have been missed.

By seeing residential care only through the images of its worst forms in the past, we are now denying some of the most damaged children the care they require. While focusing on their 'rights' such as freedom of movement and freedom of association, we are in danger of ignoring their needs; needs which are often years below their chronological age. We ignore their psychodynamic need, in Winnicott's terms, to be securely held.

Few would disagree with the general thrust of a policy of diversion. It is obvious that we should do all that is possible to prevent the removal of children, and for situations where this cannot be avoided, we should do all that is possible to reunite them with their families.

But if there is one lesson in the history of child welfare that has proved so difficult to learn, it is that there is no size that fits all, and that a broad range of individually tailored interventions is required.

Moreover, today's reality is quite different from that of the past and we cannot just go in the opposite direction to that of yesterday. We are now facing challenges in the field of child and family welfare which were not there thirty years ago. Among these are: a high and chronic level of unemployment in many communities which is demoralising parents and deeply corroding the very core of family life; the breakdown of families on a scale previously unknown; substance dependence at a level previously unimaginable; and many more parents with intellectual disabilities or major psychiatric disorders exercising reproductive rights once denied them and attempting to raise their children, often at great odds and with little support. Many of these families struggle valiantly to nurture and protect their children under conditions in which many of us might not do as well.

I am not suggesting that child abuse and neglect is a problem of 'them' – the unemployed, the drug and alcohol dependent, the single parents, the disabled. Child abuse is by no means

restricted to families living in those circumstances, and many of the families in such circumstances do not abuse or neglect their children.

But there is overwhelming evidence that families raising their children under these conditions are at far more risk of child abuse and neglect. There is a lot we can do and a lot more we need to do to support many of these parents, most of whom love their children as much as you and I love our children. Some of the broader social issues involved are far beyond the child welfare field to solve, but unless, as a community, we tackle them, we will continue to pick up the pieces at the bottom of the cliff. There is much that can be done from within the child welfare system too, if services are adequately resourced to do so.

But even with the best of what we can offer, in terms of family support and in-home intensive assistance, for some families we just do not yet know how to make enough difference so that children can be assured a basic level of safety and care. In the face of the magnitude of these problems, we have to accept that some children will need secure and stable care outside their immediate family.

*How, in the face of the
sometimes arrogant
certainty of professionals,
do we find the humanity to
acknowledge what we
don't know, that what we
are doing may not be
effective, that it may even
harm rather than help?*

And while, in some instances, this may be provided from within the extended family, 'kinship care', as we are now calling it, should not become another cliché, another policy panacea, another 'one size fits all' solution embraced because it is cheap and because it can be sold as the next best thing to mother's milk. Kinship care can be the best possible care for a child in whom a

sense of belonging and continuity of attachments can be preserved. It can also be the worst, where the dynamics in the wider family are deeply destructive for the child of the parent who is the family's black sheep, or where the same factors which impaired the parent's capacity to care for their child, also impair the caring capacity of others in the family.

Another aspect of today's reality are the images of the Royal Commissions exposing the sexual abuse of children and the failure of some of our core social institutions – the church, police, schools and the judiciary, to protect children. Do we also need to beware of the danger that some of our solutions to this might become the next generation's problems? I say this as someone who, in 1976, was at the forefront of establishing one of the earliest services for women and children who had been sexually assaulted and who, at that stage, saw the major problem as breaking through public and professional denial of the reality of child sexual abuse.

I can recall some of my psychodynamically oriented colleagues trying to convince me that these were all Oedipal fantasies. I can recall the bright young men of family therapy in Melbourne, in the early 1980s, expounding on the so-called classic collusive triangle of incest – where the seductive daughter and the colluding wife seemed to leave the incestually abusing father with no alternative! We have come a long way since then, in the awareness of both the public and professionals, that child sexual abuse is a serious social problem. It seems paradoxical that I should now warn of the dangers of this awareness.

But in continuing to challenge the denial which still remains, as it does, we must be careful not to induce a fear in families such that they withdraw, afraid to allow others to have contact with their children. In asserting the importance of sexual boundaries between generations in families, let us not confuse sexuality and the natural sensuality in the physical relationship between parent and child, and contaminate the latter.

In confronting the reality that some children behave toward other children

in sexually abusive ways, let us not create a climate in which we revert to a repressive response to exploratory sexual behaviour between children, and let us consider carefully what constitutes normal childhood sexuality in a sexually saturated society? In trying to help children act in ways which make them less vulnerable to sexual abuse, let us not create in them undue anxiety about their outer world as a dangerous place, or create undue anxiety in their inner world about their private parts and 'bad touching'.

In trying to increase recognition of the seriousness of child sexual abuse through victim impact statements and crimes compensation, let us not leave those parents, whose children have been sexually abused, with a perception of their child as irretrievably damaged – such predictions cannot be made with accuracy, and parents need to nurture their children in hope, not in despair.

In trying to prevent adults who work with children from sexually abusing them, let us refrain from regulations which seek to ban all touch between children and those who care for them. Children hunger to be touched, a point brought home to me most poignantly by Leonie when she recounted her years in the children's home and how she and the other girls looked forward to hair washing day.

This was the one time in the week when you were touched – when you could nestle your face against a nun's breast as she rubbed your hair dry with a towel. I wonder if boys had any touching of this sort at all. Let us not deny children their need to be touched in a loving way.

How we will respond to the complexity of today's realities is shaped by those three major trends in the modern era of child protection: professionalisation; bureaucratisation and politicisation. Each of these trends is a doubled-edged sword. How do we maximise the potential of each to do good and minimise the potential for harm?

PROFESSIONALISATION

Professionalisation has brought many benefits to abused and neglected children. For example, we would not have rediscovered child abuse in the 1960s if it had not been for radiological

surveys which allowed the untreated fractures of very young children to be identified. Research has also occurred in the wake of professionalisation of this field and disciplines brought to bear on the problem of child abuse and neglect. To be part of a well functioning, multidisciplinary team is an extraordinarily stimulating and productive experience.

But professionalisation also brings with it challenges – how to ensure that the boundaries between disciplines do not act as impermeable barriers, leading to domain disputes with children and families getting caught in the inter-tribal warfare?

How, in the face of the sometimes arrogant certainty of professionals, do we find the humanity to acknowledge what we don't know, that what we are doing may not be effective, that it may even harm rather than help? There is great resistance to any criticism in our field – we dismiss it as the so-called backlash, and find it hard to reflect critically upon our own practice. There really are no 'experts' in child protection – our knowledge is just not sufficiently advanced for anyone to claim that status. We must also remember that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom – this field needs the latter as well as the former.

Bertrand Russell once said, 'The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt'. It is important that our appreciation of the complexity of child abuse and neglect does not immobilise us with doubt, but it is equally important that we check ourselves when we start to be cocksure about anything in this field.

Professionals are also at risk of dismissing what others can offer. This is partly because those who volunteer their assistance can pose a threat to professionals' jobs and expertise. There are some aspects of the work which are better performed by those with the necessary knowledge and skill.

However, in the field of child welfare, one of the major challenges is to tap the 'social capital' within the community for the benefit of children and families, and there are some roles which may be

better performed by those who are not paid personnel, or professionals.

The longitudinal research on resilient children – those children who grow up in adverse circumstances but for whom the outcome is much better than for the majority of children in the same circumstances, shows the importance of at least one continuing relationship with an adult who makes a child feel worthwhile. For children for whom this cannot be a parent, it may be another relative, but for many, it will have to be someone else altogether – a teacher, a neighbour, your best mate's Mum or Dad, a sports coach.

The research shows that some children – such as those who are more physically attractive, socially engaging and intelligent, have a greater ability to seek out adults who respond to them positively, and to absorb every morsel of nourishment that the relationship has to offer. For Leonie, it was one nun, and Leonie's daughter now bears this woman's name – that reflects the significance of an adult who made one child feel that she mattered. But for some other children, we will have to work hard to facilitate such relationships. To do this, professionals need to recognise that we are not centre stage in a child's life and that it may be what we do with others and not what we do with a child directly which is crucial. There is still a reservoir of good will in the community and it must be tapped.

BUREAUCRATISATION

Perhaps Freud is not the nineteenth century mind whose intellectual legacy has had the most impact on the modern child protection field. Perhaps it is Max Weber, that founder of organisational theory and the champion of bureaucracy.

In our modern welfare state, child protection is largely the domain of bureaucratic organisational structures. Bureaucracies are brilliant for performing certain functions – like administering a social security system or delivering the post. They excel in delivering a standardised product to set specifications. But structure must be congruent with function, and responding to the complex and individualised needs of children and families is not a function which has ever been able to be

performed well from within an ordinary bureaucratic structure. To do that, Henry Mintzberg, a leading US organisational theorist, argues that you need a 'professional bureaucratic structure', not a 'machine bureaucracy'.

Professional bureaucracies allow professional practitioners a high level of autonomy as the very nature of their job requires them to make individual professional judgements in unique situations, not follow a standard procedural manual. In child welfare, some of our organisational structures are more akin to a machine bureaucracy than a professional bureaucracy and are becoming increasingly so as they live more within the shadow of the court. The core question ceases to be 'How is the child?' and instead becomes 'Do we have a case for statutory intervention?'. Staff in such organisations often become deprofessionalised and demoralised, and turnover and stress are high. Such organisational structures have difficulty in sustaining their staff, who in turn, have difficulty in sustaining families.

Bureaucratic organisational structures also find it hard to tap that reservoir of good will in the community. How does a bureaucracy respond to the gift being offered by a foster family – the gift of nurture? Foster families are now being regarded in terms of 'bed occupancy rates', to quote a senior manager I heard. What foster families are offering, and I am just using them as one example of community good will, is not a bed in a house, but a place to be nurtured.

The relationship between the organisation and the foster family must be based on respect, continuity and sensitivity to the foster families' needs. We need to remember that when we ask more of foster families than they can give, financially or emotionally, we are hurting families.

We also have to remember that such goodwill may be a finite resource. We take for granted its existence – it has been here for a hundred years but in some places, it does not exist at all. I recently spoke with a Japanese professor of social work who explained why Japanese children are still cared for in institutions. He told me that in his culture, it is very hard to cross the

barrier of the blood line and that to take another's child into one's family is not acceptable. Let us appreciate the gift of goodwill upon which our current child welfare system rests. How long might it last?

Family support services, which were originally intended to work with families so that they didn't end up in the child protection system, are increasingly being required to work almost exclusively with families referred from the child protection service, thus no longer being able to play a preventive role.

Bureaucratic organisations also have trouble reaching out to vulnerable families, especially if they carry the coercive powers of child removal with them, and are required to warn families that anything they say could be used in evidence against them, as is required in some jurisdictions. In some parts of the world it is not like this at all. So oriented are we to the English speaking world that our systems have been derived from the UK and the US. Rarely do we look elsewhere, but in places like the Netherlands, there is a radically different alternative. There, the Confidential Doctor Program, funded by the state but independent of it and staffed by a team of social workers led by a paediatrician, reaches out to families in distress, responding to self-referrals and to child protection concerns by schools or other professionals, as well as the public. They respectfully and skilfully offer assistance to families, sometimes providing help directly but often referring families to other services. A tiny proportion of their cases are referred to the statutory child protection service, which is part of what we would call the Family Court, and which deals only with cases in which legal inter-

vention is necessary to secure the safety of the child. In our systems, this is usually less than 10% of the cases.

Thus, the coercive powers of the state are reserved for that small minority of families where it is necessary, and other families are provided with assistance from less fear-inducing and alienating sources. In contrast, our systems struggle to deal with increasing numbers of child protection referrals.

The picture varies from state to state with the systems in some states being under much more pressure than others. According to national data, less than half of the notifications are substantiated as cases of child abuse or neglect, and in only a small percentage is statutory action taken.

Recent UK research by the Dartington Research Unit suggests that child protection investigation can have a very negative effect on families, even when abuse is not substantiated, and can leave parents reluctant to use services which they might need.

This system does not necessarily protect the seriously at risk child either, looking for whom is like looking for a needle in the haystack. Overwhelmed systems have only a few ways to respond. One, they can delay their response which will prove too late for some children. Two, they can respond quickly but do very superficial assessments which may result in some children not being protected and others being hurt by being removed where this is not necessary. Three, they can adopt gatekeeping strategies, responding only to those which appear to be at greatest risk. This may not be accurate and families turned away may not get the services they require to prevent subsequent abuse. The renotification rate in some states is now close to 50%, indicating that this is what is happening.

Actuarial style risk assessment instruments aimed at 'triaging' cases at the point of referral are increasingly being used as gatekeeping devices. There are many controversies associated with their use, and these will be explored in the conference. My greatest fear is that such gatekeeping strategies will not divert families through other gates which could better respond to their needs, but will divert vulnerable families into an empty paddock.

The media has helped create a climate in which physical abuse and sexual abuse, those acts of commission, are seen to be more serious than acts of omission such as neglect. So-called types of abuse travel together, and comparisons are invidious in any case, but some research would suggest that chronic neglect may have the worst outcome of all. They may even have a higher death rate, as suggested by an analysis of a group of child protection deaths in Victoria conducted by Mr Justice Fogarty.

There is a growing awareness of these issues in most states and the beginnings of new approaches and models. It is easy to know 'the bureaucracy'. Bashing the public service is a favourite Australian pastime. It does not do justice to the many committed individuals who work at both the coal face and at policy and management levels in statutory child welfare services. What is forgotten by the critics is that those responsible for managing these services are, themselves, operating in a context – legal, financial and political, over which they have limited control. An important part of the current child protection context is its politicisation.

POLITICISATION

Issues related to the bureaucratisation of child protection are intimately related to the process of politicisation which is largely the result of the publicisation of extreme cases of tragic child abuse. There is great political sensitivity surrounding examples of under-intervention which leaves some children unprotected. But there are also political risks associated with coercive over-intervention into the lives of families.

The narrative is simple – child protection professionals are the enemy and the parents, the innocent victims. There have indeed been examples of appalling over-intervention, but unlike in fantasy, in which the forces of good and evil are clearly dichotomised, in the murky twilight of the reality of child protection practice, darkness and light are rarely so clear. The child protection tightrope is very slippery, whether in relation to policy or practice. Attempts to reduce the chance of falling on one side will inevitably increase the risk of falling on the other.

Publicisation and politicisation are very much double-edged swords. Without a doubt, they have led to increased resources to the statutory end of the child protection system. But it has not necessarily led to increased resources to the much broader range of services which can help prevent families getting to the child protection edge of the cliff. In some states we have witnessed cutbacks to universal services such as maternal and child health or school support services, both unstigmatised services which can reach out to families in need in a supportive and sensitive way.

Family support services, which were originally intended to work with families so that they didn't end up in the child protection system, are increasingly being required to work almost exclusively with families referred from the child protection service, thus no longer being able to play a preventive role. Foster care agencies, which used to provide respite care on a planned, regular basis to families, in the same way that other families would have their children stay a weekend with grandparents once a month or so, can no longer do so, and are funded to only provide foster care for children removed from their families. Counselling agencies have long waiting lists and in some places, are introducing fees which poor and highly stressed families cannot afford. I don't need to go on – some of you know today's realities better than I – you are right in the middle of them, trying to respond to escalating need with fewer resources.

These are political issues and require a political response – at a Commonwealth as well as a State level. Until we, as a community, demand more resources and are prepared to pay for more resources, the situation will not change. The challenge is to make these issues as politically sensitive as the photograph of the dead baby on the front page of the newspaper. The media has an important role to play in this. We must make prevention the priority.

CONCLUSION

In the face of today's realities it is easy to become despairing. History helps us to have hope. For while it is true in part that one generation's solutions can

become the next generation's problems, this is not the whole story. When I look back just 25 years in child welfare, I am struck by the massive reforms which have been made. A black armband history does not teach us how change occurs and we need to know this if we are to continue to make changes.

Some of the major reforms in child welfare have been possible, in part, because the broader historical context created the right conditions. For example, a consumer rights movement created a context in which parents and children could assert their rights, feminism forced an awareness of problems such as child sexual abuse and domestic violence, and an indigenous rights movement exposed past practices.

But change does not occur because the spirit of the age descends and deems it to happen. Change occurs because people, individually and collectively, make it happen. People in the child welfare system contributed greatly to the reforms we have seen over the past century and over the past generation. In every state and region people struggled to make it happen – to care for children in more humane ways, to reach out and work with parents, rather than rejecting them, to create new services which helped prevent children coming into care or helped children to return home safely. These people are largely invisible – their faces are not on the news, their biographies are not in libraries, their statues will never appear in the parks for they are not leading legislators, explorers or wartime heroes.

They were, and they are, merely child welfare reformers. They did not have their eye on the future and their place in history. They just got on with doing the job. But reforms did not come about by those who just got on with doing the job, as it had always been done. Reform happens when people have a dream which leads them to do the job in a different way. That's what the reformers of yesterday did as they faced their reality. They did it with a dream of how it could be different. That too is our task as we face the complex challenges of today's reality. □