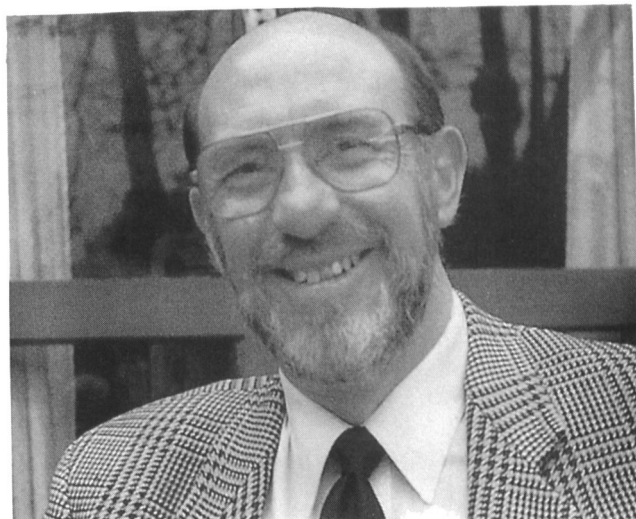


# Editorial



## Lloyd Owen

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This issue of *Children Australia* sees the nation three-quarters of the way through the International Year of the Volunteer (a *cause célèbre* for an honorary editor) and events leading to some reflection on the notion of productivity. The reflection was accentuated amid what seems to have been the case for a long time now, the steady demand to do more with less on many fronts and to provide information to a variety of seats of authority about what we are doing.

In fact a very strong trigger for these thoughts was the arrival of a questionnaire seeking views on the value of a publication from the Productivity Commission, the *Report on Government Services 2001*. Reference to the library showed it had been ordered but was not yet in stock, the thought of personal purchase was quickly rejected since cost exceeded available means but, as is often the case these days, it was to be found on the Web<sup>1</sup>. Rapid access was complicated by the aftermath of a computer crash leaving me stripped of my Adobe Acrobat reader but the complication diminished with the offer on the Commission website to hyperlink to a download of Acrobat. In turn this would allow the report to be read and downloaded. This worked, though painfully, as the Acrobat download took over an hour and my internet connection at the time was via an unlikely to be reimbursed STD call. Noting also in the highly geared user pays environment, the business of pursuing what is 'reimburseable' can be a time consuming and daunting task. Noting also that many of the helpful people have been eliminated from workplaces and replaced by more do-it-yourself systems and technological approaches. IT consultants have become precious items though they are at times overloaded, at times expensive, at times behind several layers of time gobbling recorded messages and at times their advice is difficult to understand. The occasional 'I'll walk you through it' can be an emotional peak in this high tech world.

There was, however, some gold to be found at the end of the rainbow – the *Report on Government Services 2001* is a very useful document. For me, three separate chapters could immediately be pressed into service for current projects in fields as diverse as adult corrections, disability and child protection. Each cogently outlined the state of knowledge

and activity in both State and Commonwealth programs for each of these areas. Each pointed to significant gaps in knowledge, especially in the attempt to compare jurisdictions, but they did point to the strides being made in developing a national picture of the array of services dependent on Commonwealth or State funding through the efforts of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Census and specific surveys of the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Also of considerable interest in each area is the attempt to outline objectives for each area of service and to develop performance indicators. In the case of the chapter on Protection and Support Services, indicators are proposed for child protection related to outcomes (substantiation/resubstantiation), targeting and quality, and for out-of-home care, outcomes and quality. With a focus on safety, timeliness, adherence to particular principles, certain placement characteristics and customer satisfaction, the indicators reflect substantial contemporary concerns. However, they stop quite a long way short of considering the developmental outcomes one encounters using a perspective such as the Looking After Children system which is designed to enhance outcomes for children and works on the principle that long term outcomes often rest on the accumulation and aggregation of many short term outcomes.

The emphasis on quality is laudable but if the underlying agenda is to guide resource allocation, a broader and deeper understanding of quality is needed. Our field has suffered considerably, I believe, from ill informed rationing, poorly conceived attempts to create competitive market forces and attempts at cost shifting between spheres of government, departments of government and from formal to informal sources of support, such as unresourced kinship care. There is merit attached to some aspects of these developments, but where the main motive is to save money, essential elements of a viable response can be lost. As we encounter hurting and destructive children, overloaded and burnt out workers, unrealistic expectations of carers, waiting lists and limited programs, complicated processes and fearful, sometimes punitive, cultures, the need for creative and better informed policy and planning cries out. Although I believe in the need for effectiveness and efficiency, I have become very suspicious of overemphasis on productivity savings, equity formulas and efficiency dividends. We do need to keep

working at a better understanding of what it costs to do what is needed, but we need to do what is needed when it is needed.

Much recent Australian research points to the limitations of crisis and placement focused services against better prevention, early intervention, enriched care, targeted therapeutic work and good transitional and leaving care work. It was helpful to attend the recent Face to Face National Improving Quality Forum and be startled by the array of local research in progress. The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) in New South Wales has produced its third edition of *Current Research in Child and Family Welfare*, January 2001, and has embarked on a thrice yearly journal venture, *Developing Practice*. The seminar drew together an array of researchers from around Australia, and the product of the sessions are on the Web<sup>2</sup>, as are the details of the following one day workshop, Quality Improvement in Out-of-Home Care through Looking After Children, which concerned how the LAC assessment, case planning and review system, together with its extension, the British Department of Health's Children in Need Assessment Framework, might enhance service quality. Both ACT and Western Australia have now launched statewide and cross-sectoral implementations of LAC. Two articles in this issue report on the use of LAC in agencies.

Contributors to this issue as usual cover an array of areas of interest. Linda Briskman reports on research commissioned by the Minajalku Aboriginal Corporation which explored the role of church agencies in the removal of children from their families and, importantly, the steps they are now taking to deal where possible with the impact. 'Beyond Apologies: The Stolen Generations and the Churches' returns us to the issue of policies and practice making history and their costly consequences. An observation is made about the ongoing presence of humanitarian protest and its failure to arrest the day by day destruction. My attention was recently drawn to another historical account in Australia's north which appears to be an important read – Richard Trudgen's (2000) *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*. Have we yet reached the necessary critical mass of humanitarian protest for our Aboriginal people to have an optimistic and equitable future? I wonder also what impacts we are building now for children of asylum seekers, or are we at war with them too?

Dale Bagshaw and Donna Chung report on some qualitative research undertaken by the University of South Australia. It tackles the impact issues for children who witness domestic violence and draws attention to a range of needs to be addressed. It is a useful contribution to the growing interest in the subject of the effect on children of violence in the home. In their article, 'Listening to the child victim of abuse through the process of therapy', Neerosh Mudaly and Chris Goddard have drawn on a substantial single case therapeutic intervention to explore and demonstrate many of the issues flowing from sexual abuse. It provides useful detail of the therapeutic intervention and the significance of cognitive and emotional accommodation made by both victim and perpetrator. Bronwen Elliott, Patricia Kiely and Sue Tolley in their article 'So much to gain: new approaches to child protection meetings' provide an agency perspective of using

Looking After Children (LAC) and Family Decision Making (FDM) as models to aid decision making in child protection planning meetings. Deirdre Dixon shares a study of the first 12 months of the Looking After Children (LAC) implementation by Barnardos Australia. It is worth observing that Barnardos have continued this work and, with a commercial licence, are now supporting a number of agencies in New South Wales, ACT and Victoria in LAC implementation; they are also well down the track with a computerised support package for LAC called LACES.

Rosemary Sheehan, Peter Birleson and Glenda Bawden have provided a conference report on 'Working together for children at risk'. This conference, organised by Monash University and the Southern Health Care Network, Victoria, imported some international guests and focused on trying to reach a better understanding of the nature of emotional harm to children vis-à-vis parental behaviour, and how adult mental health agencies and child welfare agencies might better work together, especially where parental mental illness is an issue.

Book reviews include the very practical guide to meeting developmental needs of children in care by Robbie Gilligan, *Promoting Resilience*, and Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald's *The Many-sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia*. This book and the review by Trudy Rosenwald pick up many issues pertinent to the present resurgence of interest in adoption in Australia. The authors have also provided a response to the review.

Lloyd Owen

## REFERENCES

Trudgen, R. (2000) *Why warriors lie down and die*, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc.

<sup>1</sup> [www.pc.gov.au/service/gspindex.html](http://www.pc.gov.au/service/gspindex.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.acwa.asn.au](http://www.acwa.asn.au)

## ERRATUM

In *Children Australia*, Vol 26 No 2, there was a formatting error in one of the references in the list at the end of Dr Frank Ainsworth's article, 'After ideology: The effectiveness of residential programs for 'at risk' adolescents'. The reference (p.18) should read as follows:

Whittaker, J.K. 2000a, 'The future of residential group care', *Child Welfare*, 79(1), pp.59-74.