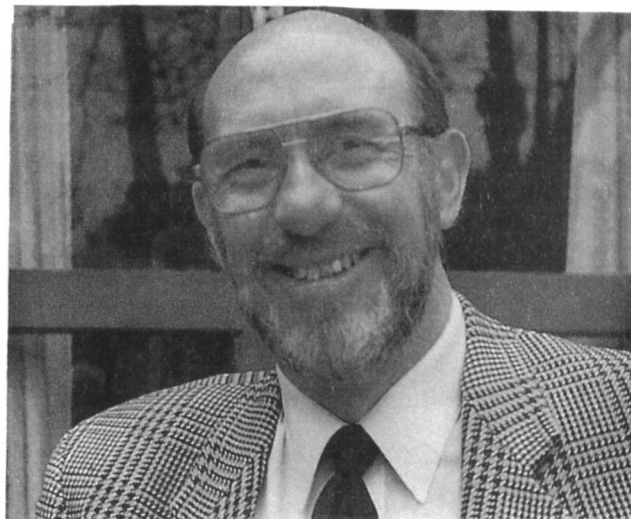


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

So much has happened in recent months in territory touching on people interested in the needs of vulnerable children. Spinning thought processes point eventually to the significance of power, process and public access to information (public relations, publicity, promotion and propaganda). Among other things, we have the impact on children of terrorism and the war on terrorism; nationally we have had crises concerning asylum seekers and child sexual abuse. On the world stage, we see various groups and leaders prosecuting terror with more terror, whilst at the same time we see the International Court of Criminal Justice attempting to struggle into life in its prosecution of past perpetrators of terror, death and destruction. Among it all we wonder which conception of justice needs promotion with the force of law and military might behind it. Might it be the complicated one, the one that measures and limits the application of force to achieve access to negotiated solutions or, in extremes, an open and fair trial of those who transgress the bottom lines of our time? Or is it simply a matter of the survival of the strongest, and the justification of cruelty through demonisation, exclusion and elimination? What credence belongs to *lex talionis*, the law of tooth and claw, or even the notion of an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth?

We have to ask questions about the sort of society we want to live in, what ideas are to be promoted, and what processes we can get into place to enable it to happen and be sustained. For me, the greatest argument against capital punishment and punitive conditions in places of incarceration is that the legitimisation of such standards sets the tone for much of our thinking, feeling and behaving in relation to others. I don't think cruelty should be condoned, and when containing and restraining behaviour is necessary to prevent a greater harm, we must invest in the development of restorative processes. Recent years have seen quite a bit of development within criminal and juvenile justice systems of some processes attached to what is now commonly termed restorative justice. Broadly they encompass attempts to redress and mitigate harms flowing from criminal acts through participative and conciliatory processes. Restitution toward reconciliation, victim offender mediation, group conferencing and attempts to facilitate empathic awareness of the world of both the victim and the offender are some features of this movement.

Such ideas, I think, need to be affirmed as part of our conception of justice.

Recent work has also turned my attention to the body of knowledge growing around work with involuntary clients. Particularly useful has been local Chris Trotter's (1999) work, which is being taken up internationally as the pro social modelling approach, and from the United States, Ronald Rooney's *Strategies for Work with Involuntary Clients* (1992), and the Ivanoff, Blythe and Tripodi (1994) work on a research based approach to involuntary clients in social work practice. Arising from fields in which sanctioned coercion is sometimes seen as necessary to avoid further harm (criminal justice, psychiatric illness, addiction), attention is paid to the factors behind the conflicts and boundary transgressions, as well as the research and practice knowledge which has accumulated to contain or avoid further harm and to increase the probability of restoring pro social pathways for those involved. Trotter points to the importance of keeping roles and their legitimacy visible and clear, the need for pro social modelling and positive reinforcement of the positive efforts of the client, the need to actively create opportunities for problem solving strategies and skills to be learned, and the value of developing a good working relationship. Rooney talks about the importance of developing practice strategies which are legal, ethical and effective. He points to the fact that much of the difficulty experienced between worker and client flows from the client's feelings of relative powerlessness, from the threat of loss of valued freedom. His approaches therefore include efforts to restore power and control over events within the boundaries of those things identified as non-negotiable. The nitty gritty ongoing work of socialisation, negotiation and task-focused development demands, it seems, a high level of honesty, relationship work and frank identification of limits and opportunities. Ivanoff et al emphasise the use of intervention strategies which have research backing as to effectiveness, but also move into the significance of tailoring prescriptions for action which attend to the details and differentials which apply to different people in different circumstances and in the differentially legislated and governed fields of child protection, criminal justice and mental health.

There appear to be lessons in this which could be applied to recent events in which powerful reactions appear to have emerged from simplistically constructed moral outrage and manipulative popular appeals. Hard lessons learned in tough practice, and supported by growing bodies of evidence, are swept aside by noisy media, ill considered emotional reactions and decisions based on narrow perspectives and short term views of events. How much do we value a humane as well as a just society? How committed are we to the pursuit of inclusion, reconciliation and tolerance of diversity while working to make clear those universal bottom lines which must be identified as crimes against humanity; those non-negotiables which must be prosecuted, but prosecuted with humanity and justice at the core of the process? The mountain is a big one to climb, but with openness to the best available intelligence and strategies which attend to the detail of the terrain, ascent is possible. It is after all the International Year of Mountains 2002.

Contributions to this issue touch on the past, the present and the future and, as is common in our field, issues of ongoing challenge and complexity. Shurlee Swain has provided the second of her articles on the history and historiography of Australian child welfare, this time including some of the specifics of practices directed at our indigenous community. Along with the screening of the film, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, it must jog consciousness and conscience in our collective Aussie spirit, and renew the drive to sustain processes of reconciliation and constructive redress wherever they are possible. Also included is some rich reflection on the state of the art writing on child welfare history.

Philip Mendes provides a perspective on the recent, highly publicised 'chroming' furore in Victoria which appears to have had significant fallout for government, welfare agencies, young people and our progress with this hard issue. Hopefully ensuing processes of inquiry will contribute to cogent policy and practice in the near future.

Cas O'Neill, Julie Hall and Jane Miller report on a collaborative health and welfare program established in 1998 which seeks to tackle some aspects of child neglect through adjustments to hospital response patterns to this at risk population. Strengthening families in a relatively non-stigmatising way is the aim of the program, which also provides a model of inter-disciplinary and inter-sectoral practice.

Helen Bryce and Paul Drielsma follow up an earlier paper on a home visiting early intervention program established in Wyong Shire in New South Wales which also aims to reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. Some evaluative data are presented concerning the first three years of operation and the service model is described.

Juliette Goldman and Usha Padayachi report on research with a sample of school counsellors in Queensland around factors bearing on the decision not to report cases of suspected child sexual abuse. Dealing with child sexual abuse remains a fraught issue for many and this research points to some of the factors operating which impede action being taken. In spite of being on many agendas, the extent to which people in general (including groups with a mandate to report) are sufficiently informed is debatable. There remains insufficient confidence in processes likely to follow reports. Some benefit to systems and stakeholders might flow from the learning suggested in the work mentioned above with involuntary client populations.

Frank Ainsworth, Sue Ash and Adele Summers also report on some research, utilising a nine year data set from a Western Australian foster care agency. Their work looks at the utility of applying some analytic techniques used overseas and speculates on some sources of variation in age of entry to care, length of episodes and gender. It takes a step in the direction of much needed research on out-of-home care in Australia. Thankfully local and national pictures are starting to emerge from efforts such as this and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare collections and data sets, sources such as the Productivity Commission's report on Government Services, and community sector initiatives such as CREATE Foundation's Report Card, all of which can now be found on the web. This March will also see the Face to Face third national partnership forum taking place in Adelaide. Its focus is on transitions in out-of-home care and it will, we hope, add further impetus to our awareness of the things we need to do to prevent our care systems from perpetuating harm and to enable them to grow and be sustained as service systems in which families and children can mend and thrive.

Dorothy Scott has provided a comment on the way forward for child protection systems. With an eye on history and an appreciation of contemporary forces and concerns, Dorothy assays some debits and credits on our ledger and presents an agenda for action. She challenges us to drag optimism from the shelf and move forward. We hope the readers and leaders in all sectors at all levels can see the wisdom in such a program.

Lloyd Owen

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