

Exeter England

from the Editor

Since arriving here in August there has been a deluge of statistics, reports and alarming stories in the press about the alleged maltreatment of children in public care. Taken together they represent a slice of the British child and family welfare scene.

First the figures. The latest statistics on Children in Care in England and Wales show that on 31st March 1976 there were 100,628 children in public care. This compares with totals of 99,000 in 1975 and 95,900 in 1974. In the twelve months up to 31st March, 1976, 52,376 children came into care and 50,546 went out of care. Of these latter 35,000 became self-supporting or returned to the care of a parent, guardian, relative or friend. Of those coming into care 12,000 did so on a short term basis, mainly on the grounds of illness of the parent or guardian. A thought provoking statistic for Australian child care workers is that 41% of all children in care are in foster care — a figure remaining constant since 1972.

Another interesting feature is that almost unnoticed, the range and ages of children in care have changed dramatically over the last 20 years. The main reasons adduced are changing family patterns, including the falling birthrate, the increasing numbers of mothers going out to work, and new penal and housing policies. The results are that there are now fewer babies and toddlers being admitted to care, but many more older children, particularly boys, who spend longer in care. It would be interesting to see if there is any evidence of a similar trend in Australia.

The trend poses important questions for policy planning and practice. Should some of the surplus units for younger children be closed or converted? Should the present emphasis on building more secure

units for the more difficult children be reversed and greater efforts made to extend foster care? The Shadow Home Secretary's promise at the recent Conservative Party Conference to build more and tougher units to administer a "short, sharp shock" gives cause for some anxiety if there is a change of government. However, some reasoned answers to these, and other questions, are expected to emerge from a working party of the National Children's Bureau London. The Chairman of the working party, Professor Ray Porter, has welcomed the overall trend affecting young children who run less risk now of prolonged stay in institutional care. But the trends affecting older children are more worrying. Although far fewer are entering care as a result of family evictions, there is an increase in numbers coming in because of truancy, the need for care and protection, and for offences. This seems to be part of a worldwide trend.

A report published in October will provide welcome information and amenities for those in Australia concerned about adoption and access to information. Alfred Leeding, a former Children's Officer has carried out the survey on behalf of the Association of British Adoption and Fostering Agencies on the way adopted persons are using their new right of access to their birth records. The survey finds that less than one per cent of those eligible have so far applied. Under Section 26 of the new Children's Act adopted persons over 18 can obtain their original birth certificates after having received counselling at the General Register Office in London or at a local authority social services department.

In 13 local authorities with a total population of 5.3 million only 279 people applied for counselling in the

4 months up to 31st March, 1977. Interestingly, as publicity about the new provision diminished, the rate of those applying has fallen. Only a fifth of the applicants said they wanted to seek out a parent and 11 per cent later informed the counsellors that they had done so. Only seven applicants displayed attitudes which gave the counsellors cause for concern. Significantly, and confirming general research findings, of the majority who volunteered comments on their relationships with their adoptive parents and family during childhood, over three-quarters said it had been satisfactory or excellent. These, and other findings should make a welcome addition to the current access debate in Australia.

A more sombre note is struck in the disquieting series of newspaper reports of allegations of illtreatment of children in some local authority children's homes. If true they must represent the cruellest paradox — a child removed from the care of parents being exposed to ill treatment by the agents of the public authority. Coming as they do hard on the heels of several instances of children battered to death in their own homes in spite of the supervision of social workers and other professionals, these reports are grounds for public concern. Residential workers in Britain, like their Australian counterparts, are frequently under enormous pressures to carry out the subtle blend of assessment, treatment and care, without adequate training, supervision or support. These tragedies can only be presented if there is much greater integration of residential and field services, backed by high quality training programmes. In the meantime no one knows where the next revelation of ill treatment will surface. As one senior social worker said to me, "There but for the grace of God go all of us".

Cliff Picton