

# Editorial

Lloyd Owen

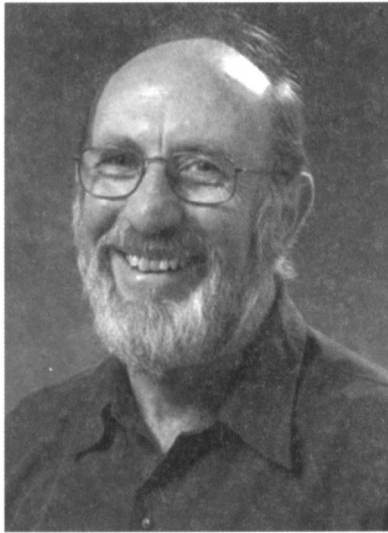
As we move into this first issue for 2003 we find threatened war with Iraq high on political and media agendas, and huge police and military deployments around threatened terrorist targets. Why isn't it possible to issue a summons for those who start wars to appear in the International Courts of Justice, just as ordinary people are charged if they assault others. They like anyone else should be entitled to a fair hearing and a humane disposition. Are we really not ready for this yet? It seems to me that we should be strengthening the United Nations as an institution, rather than undermining it, and we should work to keep its processes as transparent and accountable as possible.

We see and hear a wave of protest against war beginning to wash around the world as well. This also excites the imagination. How can we find ways to ensure that the exercise of power in any of its forms contributes to a safer and fairer world?

Also in the news are stories of bouncing money markets and corporate collapses alongside debate on the merits of multi-million dollar payouts to exiting business leaders. Can we really afford that sort of economic system to dominate so much of human activity? It seems to me that we may need a few more checks and balances applied with liberal transparency. Where the reach of a person's influence is very broad and the impact of their actions large, should we not have rules similar to the rules we apply for setting remuneration levels for judges or politicians, and independent bodies to apply them with transparent processes? From where I sit it seems that even small deliverers of human services these days are expected to observe stringent probity conditions and ever increasing productivity targets.

The United Nations International Year calls for a focus in 2003 on what is happening to fresh water. As the planet groans under the burden of 6 billion people and some very exploitative cultures, what we do with this life sustaining necessity – water – should be an instructive case study in human values and behaviour. It is one in which every single member of humankind has a stake, not to mention the animals, birds, and plants, fellow travellers in the quest for sustainability.

On the home front, bits of news have been filtering through from the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, reminding us of the importance of creating time and space to think and talk about issues of importance, to share ideas, and



to make visible to others the processes we are using to try to make sense of things that concern us. Such gatherings are important contributors to the wellbeing of children. Salient have been issues related to balancing the demands of work and family life and appreciating the seriousness of supporting families and carers in child rearing and socialising roles. The costs of not doing so are becoming increasingly indisputable. Also apparent from conference contributions was Australia's sluggishness in research and development in family support as well as a tardiness and reluctance to invest in things we already know will make a difference.

Among events of the last week, for me there have been a few 'blasts from the past'. One was a farewell to County Court Judge Eugene Cullity who retired from his post after 18 years as Chairman of the Victorian Youth Parole Board. At the beginning of those 18 years, I was working with the Board in a post in charge of institutions for children and young offenders. I was reminded in the farewell speeches of how each board member and its advisor (me) spent a good part of two weekends each month working through the 80-130 files of the young people in custody to form individual views which would inform and streamline the decision making in the Monday Board meeting. I was also reminded of some very important lessons in the humane and responsible exercise of power, the time and effort required to achieve common understanding about events and their consequences, and how actions often speak louder than words. The Cullity diligence I know has been helpful in many young lives. In one of my current projects, I am exploring again some of the factors around the use of secure care in protective services, custodial and intensive supervision options in juvenile justice, and the processes brought into play when behaviours and events get out of control, how we achieve safe and satisfying outcomes when thresholds are reached which prompt coercion or rejection. In asking around, I had heard of some interest in secure care that had arisen in English longitudinal work on children in care. There is also some work going on in England about 'the secure estate'. The following extract from an email relates to the longitudinal work.

You asked about secure units. The interview study didn't look specifically at secure units. The finding that I suspect is being referred to is one young woman who became looked after because of her challenging and violent behaviour. She had lots of placements whilst in the care of the local authority and at one point ended up at a secure unit. At interview she commented

about how much she loved that placement because it was strict and she knew where the boundaries were. She had no choice but to go to school because the unit was shut during the day. The unit was very small - only 3 residents and a relationship and trust could be built between residents and staff. No doubt it was an expensive placement and after 3 months she was moved back to a children's home in her local authority. She then had a series of other placements, most of which ended with a disruption at the request of the carer/children's home. She left care at 16, became involved in drugs, was committed to hospital under the Mental Health Act, for self harming behaviour, had an eating disorder. Generally she was very vulnerable, yet she still recalled the placement in the secure unit as the best placement she ever had and spoke animatedly about it. Three months in a placement is not long and one wonders whether her outcomes would have been more positive if she had been allowed to stay longer. Similarly, would it have been more cost effective in the long term to allow her to do so. I came across a book you might be interested in as well - O'Neill T. (2001) *Children in Secure Accommodation: A gendered exploration of locked institutional care for children in trouble*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.<sup>1</sup>

Another experience jumped out when I visited my local chiropractor and the receptionist told me that, when she was a very young teenager, I had taken her to hospital after she had thrown a tantrum in the State reception centre where she was staying, broken windows and cut her finger. She recalled me saying that we can't have this kind of thing going on as I sat with her in casualty, trying to make sense of the events and trying to achieve trust and equilibrium. Now from a vantage point of marriage and four children of her own, she thought the most important thing was the way her mother stuck with her and did not give up through a very troubled adolescence. She reminded me of many other young people who, over time, worked their way with support from family, friends or carers, through troubled times to better times. But it reminded me also how much listening and painstaking effort is required; how much work needs to go into creative, growth promoting opportunities, and how much faith needs to go into giving young people a go, and being there to dust off the slip ups and, at times, to pick up the pieces. There are rarely simple solutions, and providing the context in which such things can be worked through with a reasonable degree of safety and defensible risk is not likely to be a low cost option. Yet, with each new regime of keepers of the public purse, there seems to be a great reluctance to recognise and support the real cost of care. Do things really need to be lifted to the status of a war before we will commit the resources to do the job as well as we know how?

Contributors to this issue throw out some challenges to prevailing orthodoxies in some cases, and our reluctance to acknowledge and act on evidence in other cases. Two

authors challenge economic priorities and action. Jane Thomson picks up the theme of poverty and its connection with child maltreatment. In addition to the concerns which flow from the global institutionalisation of inequality, her small study points to the way we can all slip into narrower viewpoints which blame the victim and allow the importance of family support, income support and good children's services with whole of government support to be underplayed. Gail Winkworth takes up the cudgel on behalf of universal children's services and early intervention. The value of early intervention is clearly acknowledged and has rhetorical support at least from most, if not all, governments in Australia and tangible support from some. The trouble is, resources are tightly rationed, comprehensiveness and universalism are not in vogue for public services, and principles for targeting are not clear at best and are contested at worst.

Another two articles take us into different kinds of thorny territory. Juliette Goldman, who was a co-author in landmark comparative international work on children's sexual thinking in the eighties, continues to explore such themes in contemporary Australia. New technologies present new opportunities but also new challenges and risks. The contemporary world has much explicit sexuality in increasingly varied forms on display. At the same time many parts of the adult world are alarmed about the effects of early exposure on our children. Juliette plays up the agency of children in their own education and I suspect challenges us adults to think things through more openly and more carefully.

Frank Ainsworth also throws up a challenge to some of the orthodoxies which have developed around the way out-of-home care should be delivered in the Western world. I find his propositions a bit uncomfortable as I have seen children and young people change negatively before my eyes in poorly mixed and poorly resourced residential environments. I have also seen children rapidly deteriorate with abandonment and exposure to street and exploitative cultures. I have also encountered their hurt and disadvantage after emerging from destructive family and home based care placements. Frank asks us to think again and think about any evidence we have about what helps. He argues for the application of power, intensity and duration in responses to the needs of at risk youth. If freedom and independence for the young person are our goals, his contribution adds grist to the mill in our search for future directions.

Jennifer Lehmann introduces us to one of a number of short stories which have come out of her extensive practice in child youth and family welfare fields, and their use as a teaching tool for social work students to encourage reflection. In response to the story featured, 'Inside Anna', there is an edited essay written by Elanie Coyne, a second year social work student at La Trobe University.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Tricia Skuse, Looking After Children Project, Loughborough University, UK