

And finally ...

Keeping children's care in perspective

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When looking back through history, it is often the care of the needy and disadvantaged that is taken as the measure of our society's past decency and worth. How our ancestors dealt with the distribution of wealth, what attention they gave to issues of justice and equality, and how much concern they showed for those suffering poverty or distress are questions used to judge the value of social developments. People who work with children often keep ideas and images of children's past welfare in mind as a guide for their work today. In the process of considering the care of children historically, and particularly that of orphaned or unwanted children, one is often struck either by the lack of change in the ways by which people care for children; or by the undue praise awarded to 'progressive' or 'scientific' understandings of children's needs. The view taken does, of course, depend largely upon which era is chosen for comparison with the present.

The nineteenth century, which is typically associated with the development of modern social work, certainly leaves an impression that care of children has only improved over time. Tales of poor houses and child exploitation, made famous in novels like Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*, clearly describe periods when the care of children was negligible, ad hoc and primitive at best. Twentieth century practices may well appear enlightened by comparison. Yet unwanted children have always been present in the community and concern for their care did not simply begin with the modern era. Hospitals for foundlings, orphanages and wardship arrangements for young people have always existed in one form or another, wherever the population base was sufficient to make them necessary. Major cities like Florence, Rome and London display a remarkable amount of evidence for the organised care of abandoned infants and children from early times. In particular, the evidence from the medieval period is useful because it throws into relief the array of dilemmas and solutions that those who care for children have repeatedly encountered.

Looking at the maintenance of unwanted children before the modern era immediately provides a sense of carers' abilities to adapt to changing social expectations, values and belief systems. The medieval period, an epoch with which few social workers are familiar, was characterised by people's religiosity, the strength of its class systems and the use of intuition in place of scientific knowledge. Imagery of infants and children played an important role in medieval Christian worship and many of our current values and beliefs about children's welfare derive from this period. However, much to the dismay of childhood historians, medieval people have rarely been given credit for their care and attention to children partly as a result of Philippe Aries' work *Centuries of Childhood*, published in the 1960s. Aries and his disciples asserted that medieval parents failed to treat the child as an individual and avoided forming attachments to children because of their high rate of mortality. Of the historians who followed Aries' lead, some propounded the view that parents made no effort to keep their children alive, resulting in a widespread belief that medieval parents accepted their children's deaths with equanimity (Shahar 1990:2). As Shulamith Shahar has pointed out, however, 'no society could physically survive without a tradition of child-nurturing' (Shahar 1990:1). Although death and disease undoubtedly claimed the lives of thousands of infants in the Middle Ages, we have arguably seen much greater levels of disinterest in children's welfare closer to our own time, especially during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The formal recognition and organised support of unwanted children begins to emerge most clearly during the mid-fourteenth century when changing demographics and social sentiment conspired to put renewed emphasis on charitable activities. In the wake of the Black Death which swept across Europe between 1347 and 1350, there was increasing concern shown for the hazards accompanying pregnancy, birth and childhood (Goodich 1995:86-88). Children, like the elderly, were highly susceptible to the plague and the disease's devastating impact on the population consequently gave children's survival added importance. Coupled to this was an additional interest in children's welfare represented by the substantial number of saints' miracles that cured children of disease, injury, lameness and other difficulties (Goodich 1995:86). For the first time, a number of religious orders had also begun to promulgate the belief that childhood was a period of purity and innocence. Religious writers argued that children should be protected against evil

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influences, from 'hearing and reading lewd things, witnessing sexually immodest conduct and observing adults in their nudity' (Shahar 1990:19). The spiritual, as well as physical, health of abandoned children became increasingly significant in the eyes of carers, showing concern for children's ability to integrate into the religious and social life of the community.

The institutions that looked after children in the Middle Ages inevitably faced a number of the same issues as modern welfare services. Simply housing and feeding large groups of children of varying ages presents a variety of difficulties. However, among the most interesting medieval foundations to consider is Florence's Ospedale degli Innocenti (Hospital of the Innocents) which has been the subject of detailed research by Philip Gavitt (1990). Gavitt's compilation and analysis of materials relating to the Hospital has brought to light many of the dilemmas faced by the staff who worked there. His research has illustrated the impact of people's values, expectations and social customs on practices and maintenance of the institution. Events in the lives of those who lived in the Hospital have also been documented and provide some of the most touching examples of the successes and frustrations encountered by those associated with the institution.

To watch the cycle of poverty repeat itself has long been a cause of apprehension for welfare workers in the modern era, but it equally worried the carers of children in fifteenth-century Florence.

The Ospedale degli Innocenti was built in 1419, during a period when wealthy Florentines were 'leaving less money to religious orders and giving more to institutions that specialized in the social problems' (Gavitt 1990:1). The Hospital received its funds from the commune of Florence, the Florentine silk guild and from private donations (Gavitt 1990:52-55). Its primary role was to care for orphans and foundlings, but it also took in children whose parents were alive though unable to offer care. In some cases, for example, a child's mother had died and the widowed father felt unable to meet the infant's needs. Other children were abandoned at the Hospital due to complications with family inheritances or because a widowed parent was intending to remarry. A large number of parents initially left their children at the Hospital with the expressed intent of reclaiming them later. Ultimately only 6% of such children were returned to their families, although several parents monitored their children's progress from afar and a few later provided dowries for their abandoned daughters (Gavitt

1994:71). Between 1445 and 1466, the Hospital admitted 2,567 children, a number which rose to 3,903 between 1467 and 1485 (Gavitt 1990:209; 1994:72). The majority the children were less than one year old when they were received, and in most years there was a slightly higher number of girls than boys.

The subsequent mixture of ages, gender and reasons for the children's being at the Hospital meant that staff were obliged to tackle a range of issues relating to the children's physical, emotional and social needs. The Hospital needed to provide education and employment for the older children, and supported adoptions that led to apprenticeship opportunities. Infants, on the other hand, needed wet-nursing from women in the community and it was essential for staff to keep tabs on the care that infants received in private homes. Other children who lived in the Hospital were able to go out 'working in the shops' during the day when they were six or more. But there was also a small handful of children with disabilities for whom additional supervision would have been necessary (Gavitt 1994:80). The young children who remained in the Hospital during the day also needed supervision and occupation, before they were rejoined by the others at the end of the day. Not surprisingly, people in the wider Florentine community responded to the institution's needs in a variety of different ways, with some individuals donating their skills and expertise to the Hospital, while others offered their services through formal employment. In 1445, for instance, the Hospital hired doctors who agreed to offer their services 'for the love of God and the salvation of their souls, without any salary' (Gavitt 1990:155). In contrast, Mona Apollonia was hired for an annual salary of eleven florins 'because she is a very talented woman in every way, especially at weaving garments. She was hired to teach weaving to our little girls,' (Gavitt 1990:153).

The willingness with which Florentines offered their skills, money or services to the institution was due in no small measure to the Hospital's status as one of the community's most deserving causes. The perennial desire to distinguish between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor meant that considerable favour was shown towards the vulnerable and undoubtedly 'deserving' children cared for by the Innocenti. Less sympathy, however, might be shown towards the parents of the children if one or both of their identities happened to be known. At one time, legislation was proposed to tax one florin from every person who bought or hired a slave or servant in Florence, on the grounds that female servants and slaves were 'most likely to burden the Innocenti with unwanted children,' (Gavitt 1994:74-75). Even if a servant girl had been the victim of unwanted sexual advances from her master, Florentine society ascribed to its slaves and servants 'a lack of care for their own honour.' Equally insidious was the absence of institutional and structural support for women who were poor or who lacked the protection of male kinsmen. Even

though the Hospital endeavoured to prevent its own charges from falling into the cycle of poverty, economic and social disadvantage still took a toll. There were at least two occasions when girls raised by the Innocenti were forced to abandon their own children to the Hospital owing to their level of disadvantage in the community (Gavitt 1994:83).

Experiences like these reveal the inherent difficulties of rearing unwanted children in any culture where familial ties and status determine opportunity and prosperity. To watch the cycle of poverty repeat itself has long been a cause of apprehension for welfare workers in the modern era, but it equally worried the carers of children in fifteenth-century Florence. Other issues that confronted the Hospital of the Innocents arose from the economic pressures that the institution faced both on a long term and day-to-day basis. As the prosperity of the Florentine community fluctuated and the emphasis on charity waxed and waned, so, accordingly, the Hospital imposed some very modern fee-for-service arrangements to raise its income. While fee-for-service agreements were not pursued with particular vigour at the Hospital, contributions were asked of parents who came to reclaim their children, or of those who had come in person to leave their children with the Hospital in the first place. In 1459, for example, a slave called Giuliana was allowed to take back her son, Lorenzo, with the provision that she paid half of the fifty lire the Hospital had spent on her son's care (Gavitt 1990:203). Most of these arrangements were made on a very flexible basis and could be waived entirely when people's poverty made payment or donations impossible. Yet the introduction of such arrangements indicates that conflict between fiscal and charitable interests was alive and well as it continues to be today.

While the Hospital of the Innocents provides only one example of the care provided by institutions in the Middle Ages, it clearly highlights some of the reasons why one may feel hopeful and, at times, discouraged, in the course of helping children in need. Despite the support and enthusiasm shown for welfare services by the community, structures within society itself may go a long way towards blocking carers' efforts. The best of intentions can always be thwarted as the strength of political will ebbs and flows. Yet the resilience one encounters, both in the context of the fifteenth-century Hospital and in modern welfare services, should be a cause for positive reflection. Despite the burdens of a high infant mortality rate and intermittent outbreaks of disease, the staff of the Florence hospital still managed to ensure that many of the children were successfully raised and integrated into the community. Today, the restrictions of modern bureaucracy may make the most straightforward solutions seem almost impossible to implement, but the long term opportunities for unwanted children to succeed in life are, in theory at least, greater than they have ever been. There are very few approaches to the care of children that

have not been examined or attempted at some stage in the past. But while the fundamental problems and solutions encountered by social workers may not have changed much over the centuries, the task of matching the two together remains a source of pride for those in the helping professions – regardless of the era or context in which the work is undertaken. □

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