

After rushing through another year, I find the run-up to Christmas is usually a time when I pause to draw breath and take stock of what has been achieved over the previous twelve months. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately in terms of my continued employment (!), there are always still many things on the 'to do' list; and I hope for the opportunity to attend to them in the coming year. However, it is always sobering to contemplate the big issues that continue to loom in what we loosely call our democratic and humanistic society.

In reflecting over the year, we have seen the establishment of industrial and welfare reforms that move us even further away from the ideals of earlier generations. The blinkered race to the 'wealth' post continues to 'bracket out' of the equation significant groups in our communities who are getting fewer real opportunities to achieve equity with their peers. I recently listened to someone who spoke of the imperative to provide opportunities for 'the disadvantaged' and, in the same breath, spoke of their responsibility to take up the opportunities provided. I readied myself to respond, and then held my peace. How could I begin to explain that opportunities are designed and structured by the 'haves'; that the notion of responsibility is defined by those who are housed, fed, educated, entertained and employed? How does one offer a simple explanation of compounding disadvantage?

In addition, the new legislation concerning terrorism and sedition are alarming many who have read the fine print. Are our rights to speak out being eroded? Certainly our rights to information are increasingly problematic and, for those who appear or sound different to the white majority, there is now little protection from accusations and ensuing interrogative approaches.

On a more positive note, there have been some interesting developments in our community services industry during the year. The new Child, Youth and Families Bill 2005 for Victoria has proceeded through both Houses. Further efforts have been made to create partnerships between agencies in the sector and between government departments and agencies. While there are always tensions and barriers to be overcome, there appears to be a real commitment to dealing with the risks and problematic issues in a more collaborative manner with the Sector Development process being a part of this effort. And a new report has been launched by Human Rights Commissioner, Dr Ozdowski OAM. This was his final project to be launched before his five-year tenure ended on 7th December 2005.



The report, *Rights of Passage: A Dialogue with Young Australians about Human Rights*, provides an insight into what young people in Australia know about human rights and what they think about topical issues such as terrorism, workplace reforms, torture, refugees, Indigenous issues and bullying. Dr Ozdowski commented that he was 'encouraged to find that young people were eager to share their observations on discrimination, equality, tolerance, vilification and many other topics'. He believed that the view of young Australians embodied 'some of the

best characteristics of the Australian ethos – fairness, tolerance, egalitarianism, respect and celebration of difference' and remarked that 'their vision of the future gave me much cause for optimism.' The report can be accessed at: http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/rights_of_passage/

In this edition of the journal, we span a number of topics pertinent to the work of many in the field of human services. David Vicary and his colleagues report on their work with children in 'Children as decision makers' with this initiative being one of the Western Australian Office of Children and Youth's key activities in 2004. While many have been sceptical about the ability of children to engage in planning, decision making and the evaluation of services, the experience of staff in WA demonstrates a very different view. The challenge will be to encourage other states to consider establishing ongoing structures to allow children's voices to be heard, together with the provision of adequate resources.

Cas O'Neill's 'Christmas without the kids' is a poignant article that is very 'earthing' in terms of seeing the loss and absence of children through the eyes of parents; the people who will spend this Christmas with the sense that their families are incomplete. Research with parents who have had their children removed from their care is not common, as this is generally considered an extremely sensitive topic for investigation. While there is much anecdotal evidence held within the oral traditions of the field, it is timely to hear from the voices of parents themselves, and to reflect on the long and difficult task of returning children to their parents' care, this being an aspect that is often neglected in practice.

Dianne Rogers' paper addresses the subject of attention deficit disorder — one that has been a topic for debate in recent years. She discusses both the two dominant discourses

underpinning approaches to ADD and ADHD, as well as the less well-known discourses. With these disorders being diagnosed at increasing rates, Dianne's purpose for contributing the article is to highlight that the theoretical positions embedded in the practice strategies recommended by professionals, result in varying outcomes for families and individuals affected by the disorder. She argues that competing discourses can divert attention from the impacts of power in our work with families and that knowledge does not reside only with professionals.

In Current Perspectives, Di O'Neil responds to Carolyn Cousins' article, 'The "Rule of Optimism": Dilemmas of embracing a strength based approach in child protection work', published in *Children Australia* (Volume 30, No 2, 2005). Carolyn's article motivated Di to reflect on her experiences of working with child protection professionals and the use of the strengths-based approach. Her core thesis is that a strengths approach provides a framework and a set of tools to facilitate hopeful practice, and that this can be brought to bear in the most complex and difficult of family situations. Practitioners will find this paper an interesting contribution to furthering the debates that are associated with the strengths approach.

Finally, Lloyd Owen's paper 'Whither Youth?' heralds the 7th International 'Looking After Children' Conference which is to be held in Australia for the first time in August 2006. Its theme is 'positive futures' and, given the continued dilemmas experienced by professionals in the field, and the impacts that children and young people continue to experience as a result of our interventions, the Conference

will serve to focus our thinking further on a range of issues. Lloyd has always been admired for his ability to bring together the 'big picture' issues with individual lived experience, and this contribution again assists in bridging themes that are often fragmented.

In drawing editorial commentary to a close for 2005, some special mentions are in order. Firstly, Andrew McCallum, recently retired President of ACOSS, has announced his resignation from St Luke's Anglicare in Bendigo. This will no doubt be a loss to the organisation which has grown under his leadership over nearly 20 years to be a major provider of services recognised for strengths-based approaches and innovative service development. Secondly, I would like to express appreciation to Lloyd Owen, Co-editor of the journal, who continues to contribute ideas and energy in spite of extensive responsibilities and his PhD studies. Good health and 'calmer waters' for 2006, Lloyd! To Lorraine, our editorial assistant, thank you for your unfailing support and expertise in getting the journal into the hands of subscribers in the face of sometimes unimaginable difficulties. Until one edits a journal, it is impossible to grasp the vagaries of the business! And to Oz Child, thank you for your continuing support of the journal. Finally, to all those who contribute and review articles, thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience. It's not such an easy matter to either write or review papers and the journal depends on your support.

Jennifer Lehmann



*Best wishes
to all our readers for
a happy holiday season
and
a safe and peaceful New Year in 2006*