Exploring the dimensions of professionalising fostering

Carers' perceptions of their fostering role

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Australia is experiencing major difficulties attracting and retaining foster carers. This crisis in recruitment has focused attention on whether fostering can continue to rely on voluntary carers. This paper examines data from a 2003/4 survey of foster carers in New South Wales commissioned by the Department of Community Services. The research explores carers' perceptions of the nature of the fostering role and examines these in relation to three dimensions of professionalisation: training, support and payment. The findings indicate that the majority of carers believe fostering should be regarded as a professional or semi-professional role. Among these carers, there was a higher level of support for the three dimensions of professionalisation compared to carers who regard their role as voluntary. Differences in perceptions were not attributable to other socio-demographic characteristics, aside from education levels. This paper also addresses the policy implications of these findings for the future recruitment and retention of carers.

Children considered at risk of abuse or neglect in their parental home may require placement in out-of-home care (OOHC). All States and Territories[1] in Australia offer a similar range of placement options for children in OOHC, including foster care, kinship care and small residential institutions. Currently the vast majority of children in need of OOHC placement are placed in home-based care.[2] Home-based care is provided by volunteer foster and kinship carers. Placements in OOHC are managed either by a statutory authority or by non-government agencies. In New South Wales, around 70 per cent of all placements in OOHC are managed through the Department of Community Services (DoCS).

In 2003-04, there were 21,795 children and young people aged 0-17 years in out-of-home care in Australia (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2005). Children requiring OOHC are presenting with increasingly complex and challenging needs due in part to greater rates of family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence and mental health issues. Thus, 'the complexities of modern societies are reflected in the social conditions and problems which young people coming into care now exhibit' (Butcher 2004a: 42). There is also a perception that more children with disabilities (physical and intellectual) are coming into care (Department of Human Services 2003: 74).

A recent study for DoCS on foster carers in NSW indicated that the typical carer is female; aged 48 years; Australian-born; has completed Year 10 schooling (or equivalent); is not in the labour force; and has been fostering for five years or less. More than one-third of primary carers were in paid employment, as were almost three-quarters of secondary carers.[3] Of those who were not in employment, many relied

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[1] For ease of discussion 'States and Territories' will henceforth be referred to as 'States'.

[2] In June 2004, 94 per cent of children in OOHC were placed in home-based care with foster carers or kin carers although the proportion with foster or kin carers varies from state to state (AIHW 2005).

[3] Secondary carers are usually the partners/husbands of primary carers.

on government pensions or allowances as their principle source of income. Foster carers in NSW are entitled to receive a subsidy (*Care Allowance*) to assist in the day-to-day costs of children in their care. In 2003-04, carers received a *Care Allowance* of $350 per fortnight. For children with special needs, carers were entitled to receive *Care Allowance*+1 ($525) or *Care Allowance*+2 ($700) per fortnight[4] (McHugh et al. 2004).

SHORTAGE OF CARERS

Australia, like many Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, is experiencing major difficulties attracting and retaining foster carers (Barber & Gilbertson 2001; Carter 2002; Child & Family Welfare Association of Australia 2002; Community Services Commission 2000; Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004; DHS 2003; Fostering Network 2004; Peakcare Queensland 2002).[5] It is difficult to quantify the shortage of foster carers in Australia as there is no central database indicating current or past numbers of carers and evidence of agencies' shortage is largely anecdotal. However, a recent Victorian report indicates that foster carer numbers in that State have been declining since 1995 (DHS 2005: 90).

The current shortage of foster carers is largely attributable to the changing social and economic role of women in the late twentieth century. The increasing labour force participation of married women with children, women who have historically undertaken foster care, is seen as a major factor contributing to the shortage of carers. In addition, women's changing roles not only reflect individual aspirations in relation to education and career choices, but also choices around family formation and having children (NATSEM 2005; OECD 2002). This crisis in recruitment has major implications for the hierarchy of placement options evident in policy documents that prioritise home-based care (DoCS 2003, 2004).

CHANGING NATURE OF FOSTER CARE

These days, children entering OOHC are presenting with increasingly complex needs and challenging behaviours. A number of Commonwealth and State funded early intervention and family support programs (for example, Families First, NSW) have benefited many vulnerable families and, as a consequence, many 'easier to care for' children have not entered the OOHC system. However, the children that are beyond the scope of early intervention and support programs, or where early intervention has failed to ameliorate the problem, are the ones that enter OOHC, often with entrenched behavioural problems and complex needs. As such, the task of fostering has become increasingly demanding and challenging for many carers (Siminski, Chalmers & McHugh 2005). This problem is not specific to Australia, but is consistent with trends throughout the western world.

Where once volunteer carers could simply offer 'substitute parenting' to meet the needs of children in OOHC, they are now being asked to play the role of 'parent-therapist' or 'surrogate-therapist', a far more challenging role few are trained for, or skilled to carry out (Cashmore, Dolby & Brennan 1994: 104). In addition to 'good' parenting skills, most foster carers are now expected to be competent in a number of areas including: monitoring a child's developmental needs; helping a child move to another placement; attending reviews and case planning meetings when requested; attending court; and writing reports for review (Corrick 1999). There is also an increasing expectation that carers will undertake ongoing training once they have been assessed and received initial training (McHugh et al. 2004).

PROFESSIONALISING FOSTER CARE?

Historically, the notion of 'altruistic motivation' has been embedded in the concept of fostering (Warren 1999). The assumption that wives and mothers would undertake foster care on a voluntary basis has been implicit in policy and practice underlying the provision of OOHC in Australia and elsewhere for many decades. However, the current crisis in carer recruitment and the increasingly demanding nature of the fostering role have focused discussion on, and developments in, the professionalisation of foster care (Colton & Williams 1997; Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003; Sinclair, Gibbs & Wilson 2000; Zelizer 1985).

While debate has begun on the topic in a number of western countries, the full dimensions of professionalisation have yet to be developed. The dimensions of the professionalisation of foster care that are raised in the literature focus primarily on remuneration and respect/status. Additional dimensions of professionalisation for carers include: adequate support; regular training; skills/qualifications; respite facilities; and the availability of specialist advice (Butcher 2005; Sellick 1999; Thorpe 2004).

In parts of the UK and US, there is increasing recognition of fostering as a skilled profession that should, and is, being duly rewarded (Butcher 2005, 2004a, 2004b; Corrik 1999; Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003; National Foster Care Association 1996; Testa & Rolock 1999). In recent years, a significant number of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of foster care have been introduced in the UK. One of these initiatives is the 'Payment for Skills' scheme, which enables general foster carers to increase their skill levels

[4] In September 2005, *Care Allowance* was increased to $364 per fortnight; *Care Allowance+1* to $546 per fortnight; and *Care Allowance+2* to $721 per fortnight.

[5] The Operation Foster Care Campaign was launched in NSW in September 2005 to highlight the urgent need for more foster carers and to increase public understanding of fostering.

through undertaking carer training courses. Higher skill levels attained by a carer can lead to 'modest increments' in a carer fee payment (Corrick 1999; Hayden et al. 1999; Lowe 1999; NFCA 1996).[6]

It is important to note, however, that issues surrounding the professionalisation of foster care are complex and controversial. In particular, the issue of paying carers a fee is seen as particularly contentious. Payment of a fee imposes significant costs on agencies and it also challenges the 'altruistic motivation' (Warren 1999) of carers who 'ought to foster for love' (Corrick 1999). Researchers in the US note that the move to paying foster carers salaries for the work they do brings to the surface 'long-standing controversies over the appropriate balance between family altruism and monetary incentives as motives for becoming foster parents' (Testa & Rolock 1999: 110).

Where once volunteer carers could simply offer 'substitute parenting' to meet the needs of children in out-of-home care, they are now being asked to play ... a far more challenging role ...

Yet, the issue of paying foster carers a fee (or salary) is not a new debate. In the US in the 1940s, the payment of a fee to foster carers to recompense them for the 'contribution they make over and above the physical care and maintenance of the child' was raised by the Washington Council of Social Services (Zelizer 1985: 206). An additional objective of introducing a fee for carers was to identify foster care as a service rather than a charity. However, as Zelizer notes, the move was opposed on the grounds that payment would reduce 'the motherly altruism [involved in fostering] to an ordinary task' (1985: 206). Thus, the reliance on altruism as the primary motivator for undertaking foster care was strengthened, reinforcing the undervaluation of women's labour.

Limited research has been conducted on carers' views of payments in the UK (Hayden et al. 1999; Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003; Oldfield 1997). Research suggests that the payment of a fee to attract carers could go some way towards alleviating the current crisis in recruitment (Hayden et al. 1999) and also help with retention (Oldfield 1997).

The Australian debate on the professionalisation of foster care is still in its infancy. The topic was most recently addressed at the 1997 National Foster Care Annual Conference (SAFCARE 1997). A number of issues were identified and discussed, including the payment of wages or salaries to carers. Delegates perceived a number of disadvantages in carers being paid a wage, including the concern that the fostering role would change; a greater contribution may be required of carers; carers could be pressured or exploited; and carers could lose the balance between private and working life. There was also concern around a change in the fostered child's attitude and a fear of community reprisal. Some carers also voiced practical concerns about the payment of income tax and loss of pensions and benefits. However, they also identified advantages associated with payment, including the positive influence it could have on recruitment, particularly for those who would like to foster but cannot afford to, owing to the low level of allowances. An additional advantage identified was that it would give carers access to superannuation.

Two recent Queensland studies explored some of the issues around the professionalisation of foster care (Butcher 2004b; Thorpe 2004). Both studies found ambivalence on the part of some carers in relation to receiving payments (ie, wage/salary) for caring work. Around one-quarter of carers in Thorpe's study thought fostering should be professional and had no problem with carers receiving payment for the work they do (Thorpe 2004), whilst the majority of carers in Butcher's study thought that fostering should be regarded as a professional role requiring formal training, qualifications and payment (Butcher 2004b).

A more professional approach is evident in many developments occurring in the sector, particularly in relation to the initial and ongoing training of carers (Australian Foster Care Association 2005; Butcher 2005, 2004a, 2004b; McHugh et al. 2004; Thorpe 2004). In 2004, a collaborative attempt was made by the States and the Commonwealth to improve the quality of foster care across the country by establishing a *National Plan for Foster Carers*. The Plan addresses nationally accredited training for carers (AFCA 2005). The current position of the Australian Foster Care Association (AFCA) appears to be in support of maintaining the voluntary status of most carers while recognising that a more professional approach is required, including carer training (AFCA 2004).

The aim of this paper is to advance the debate on the topic of the professionalisation of foster care in Australia. It does not propose a model of how foster care should be professionalised. Survey data from a study with NSW foster carers are analysed to explore carers' perceptions of the nature of the fostering role (McHugh et al. 2004). Specifically, this paper examines whether carers feel fostering is voluntary work, semi-professional work or professional work, and whether perceptions vary according to a range of variables. If these dimensions of professionalisation are indeed important to individuals who

[6] 'Payment for skills' schemes have two carer remuneration components: a maintenance (subsidy) payment to meet the needs of a child, and a fee payment in recognition of carer skills.

undertake foster care, this could have major implications for the recruitment and retention of carers and the quality of care they provide.

BACKGROUND TO THE DATA

The findings reported in this paper come from a study of the current and projected availability of foster carers in New South Wales. The project was commissioned by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Community Services (DoCS) and undertaken by a research team based at the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at the University of New South Wales. The study was undertaken between October 2003 and April 2004. The methodological approaches employed in the study included an analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on foster carers in addition to three fieldwork components, comprising a postal survey of foster carers in NSW, interviews with key stakeholders in the foster care sector, and focus groups with carers and Departmental staff to explore the issues of recruitment and retention (McHugh et al. 2004).

The data examined in this paper are from the postal survey with carers. In December 2003, one thousand surveys were sent to a random sample of foster carers in NSW.[7] By early February 2004, 450 usable surveys had been returned giving a 45 per cent response rate.[8] Topics covered in the survey included carer demographic information, reasons for, and attractions to, fostering, foster care training, and financial and non-financial support received. In the discussion of the findings, reference is made to other relevant studies in the area.

The survey collected data on 'primary carer' and 'secondary carer', rather than male or female carer. The majority of primary carers were female (92 per cent) and the majority of secondary carers were male (90 per cent). The data presented in this paper represent the views of the primary carers.

FINDINGS

This section of the paper focuses on carers' views of how they thought the role of fostering *is* and *should* be considered. In the survey, carers were asked to respond to three definitions[9] of fostering and to describe which best described their *current* role; which best described how they thought fostering *should* be; and how they thought others in the community (friends and neighbours) saw their role. The respondents were given three definitions of foster care work. The first described fostering as a voluntary activity, the second described it as semi-professional work, and the third described it as a professional activity:

i. Fostering is parent-like work in the family. It's non-professional or voluntary work.

ii. Fostering requires some skills and experience in addition to 'good' parenting. It's semi-professional work.

iii. Fostering is similar to a job carried out in the home requiring training and payment (either fee for service or salary). It's professional work.

Table 1: NSW carers' perception of the fostering role

	Voluntary work %	Semi-professional %	Professional %	Per cent %
Current fostering role	27.3	56.9	15.8	100.0 (n=425)
What the fostering role should be	13.3	54.3	32.4	100.0 (n=429)

The findings in Table 1 show that the majority of carers felt their current foster role was and *should* be seen as a semi-professional or professional role. Almost three-quarters of carers thought their current role was semi-professional or professional (57 per cent and 16 per cent respectively) and a third thought their current role was best described as voluntary work. With regard to how they thought their role *should* be considered, more than half of the carers (54 per cent) thought their role should be regarded as semi-professional, a third (32 per cent) thought it should be regarded as professional, and only 13 per cent thought fostering should be regarded as non-professional voluntary work.

The divergence in the responses lies primarily in terms of whether carers thought their caring role was or should be best described as voluntary or professional work. While only 13 per cent of respondents thought that the fostering role *should* be voluntary work, more than a quarter (27 per cent) thought that this was how their current role was best described. Similarly, a third of the carers (32 per cent) thought their role *should* be a professional role, yet only 16

[7] Carers' details were obtained from DoCS area offices and community services centres carer mailing lists.

[8] As there was no central database of carers in NSW, there was no way of comparing the characteristics of the carers who responded to the survey with the characteristics of non-respondents. Nevertheless, many of the carer socio-demographic characteristics found in the study were broadly comparable with ABS Census data analysed as part of the study.

[9] These definitions were originally devised for a Queensland project 'Foster Care for Children in Care and Protection of the Queensland Department of Families, Mackay Whitsunday Region' and adapted for the DoCS study (Thorpe 2004).

Table 2: NSW carers' perception of the fostering role by education level

What fostering should be:	Primary carer's education		Per cent
	Yr 10 or below %	Yr 11 or 12 %	
Voluntary work	80.4	19.6	100.0 (n=57)
Semi-professional	55.0	45.0	100.0 (n=233)
Professional	59.3	42.1	100.0 (n=139)

Table 3: NSW carers' perception of the fostering role by on-going training undertaken

What fostering should be:	Have undertaken on-going training		Per cent
	Yes %	No %	
Voluntary work	40.4	59.6	100.0 (n=57)
Semi-professional	57.9	42.1	100.0 (n=233)
Professional	56.8	43.2	100.0 (n=139)

Table 4: NSW carers' perception of their fostering role by accreditation of training

What fostering should be:	Accreditation for training undertaken		Per cent
	Yes %	No %	
Voluntary work	61.8	38.2	100.0 (n=55)
Semi-professional	74.6	25.4	100.0 (n=224)
Professional	83.2	16.8	100.0 (n=137)

per cent thought that their current role was best described as a professional role.

The finding that 87 per cent of NSW carers believe fostering should be a professional or semi-professional role accords with findings from two Queensland studies with carers using similar definitions of the fostering role. The larger study with 115 foster carers found over two-thirds (68%) of carers thought fostering should be professional or semi-professional (Thorpe 2004). A smaller study with forty carers found more than three-quarters of carers believed fostering should be professional as it would elevate its status and raise the standing of carers with Departmental staff and other professionals (Butcher 2004a, 2004b).

The remainder of this paper focuses on how NSW carers thought the fostering role should be considered and whether their perceptions varied according to a number of socio-demographic characteristics, including carers' age, education, household type (ie, single carer household or carer couple household) and length of time fostering. Carers' perceptions were then examined in relation to variables that explored some of the dimensions of professionalisation of caring, including training undertaken, perceived level of Departmental support for carers (non-financial support) and the adequacy of remuneration for carers (financial support).

For ease of description, carers who thought the fostering role should be regarded as voluntary work will be referred to as the 'voluntary group', those who thought it should be regarded as semi-professional work will be referred to as the 'semi-professional group', and those who thought it should be regarded as professional work will be referred to as the 'professional group'.

CARER EDUCATION

The relationship between carers' perceptions of the fostering role and their educational attainment was explored and the findings show a relationship between educational attainment and perceptions (Table 2). Twice the proportion of the professional and semi-professional groups had completed Years 11 or 12 of high school (42 and 45 per cent respectively) compared to the voluntary group (20 per cent). Similarly, a higher proportion of the professional and semi-professional groups had attained a post-school qualification (58 per cent and 62 per cent respectively) compared to 37 per cent of the voluntary group.

Carers' perceptions of the fostering role were also examined in relation to a number of socio-demographic characteristics. However, no relationship was found between perceptions of the fostering role and a carer's age, household type (ie, single or couple carer household), length of time fostering, or level of allowance received.

TRAINING

The survey explored a number of dimensions of training, including training undertaken to date, the willingness to undertake further training and the accreditation of carers for training undertaken whilst fostering.

The findings show a relationship between carers' perceptions of how the fostering role should be regarded and the likelihood of having undertaken training (Table 3). Carers who thought the fostering role should be regarded as voluntary work were less likely to have undertaken on-going training whilst fostering, with only 40 per cent having done so, compared to 57 per cent of the professional group and 58 per cent of the semi-professional group.

Carers' willingness to undertake further on-going training if their costs were covered and childcare was provided was also related to how they thought the fostering role should be regarded.

Table 5: NSW carers' perception of their fostering role by the importance of support in retaining carers in the system

What fostering should be:	Carer would continue if they received more support			Per cent
	Agree %	Unsure %	Disagree %	
Voluntary work	78.8	19.2	1.9	100.0 (n=52)
Semi-professional	81.3	13.8	4.9	100.0 (n=224)
Professional	90.8	4.6	4.6	100.0 (n=130)

Table 6: NSW carers' perception of their fostering role by the importance of respect in retaining carers in the system

What fostering should be:	Carer would continue if they received more respect from workers			Per cent
	Agree %	Unsure %	Disagree %	
Voluntary work	64.0	28.0	8.0	100.0 (n=50)
Semi-professional	72.6	16.9	10.5	100.0 (n=219)
Professional	81.3	10.9	7.8	100.0 (n=128)

Table 7: NSW carers' perception of their fostering role by perceived adequacy of care allowance

What fostering should be:	Level of allowance/subsidy			Per cent
	Payment generous %	Payment about right %	Payment low %	
Voluntary work	10.7	51.8	37.5	100.0 (n=56)
Semi-professional	8.5	49.1	42.4	100.0 (n=224)
Professional	3.8	38.5	57.7	100.0 (n=130)

Respondents were asked whether they thought that carers should be accredited or receive formal recognition (eg, a diploma or certificate) for training undertaken whilst fostering (Table 4). A higher proportion of the professional group supported the accreditation of carers for training undertaken (83 per cent) compared to three-quarters of the semi-professional group (75 per cent) and under two-thirds of the voluntary group (62 per cent). Virtually all the carers in Butcher's Queensland study wanted training to be nationally accredited by having their qualifications recognised in all States or Territories. The Queensland carers believed that having qualifications (ie, accredited training) would see them treated with more respect and having their views taken more seriously by Departmental staff and other professionals (Butcher 2004a, 2004b).

NON-FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Carers' perceptions of the nature of the fostering role were also explored in relation to a number of aspects of Departmental support. Support for carers is comprised of a number of elements including: regular contact with the child's caseworker; availability of 24 hour contact with someone in the agency/Department; having carers' views and opinions taken seriously by workers; working as a team; ongoing carer training; counselling for carer family members when required; protocols for dealing with 'false' allegations of abuse; and respite for carer families (Triseliotis, Borland & Hill 2000: 172-73).

To illustrate but a few of these elements, this paper focuses on: support from the Department, that is, 'being looked after'; the importance of support, respect and respite for carers in retaining them in the system; and, carer remuneration.

The importance of Departmental support for retaining carers in the system was seen as significant by all groups of carers (Table 5). The findings indicate that 91 per cent of the professional group, 81 per cent of the semi-professional group, and 79 per cent of the voluntary group agreed that carers would continue fostering if the Department provided more carer support.

The importance of respect from workers was also explored in the survey and a higher proportion of the professional group of carers emphasised the importance of being accorded respect by Departmental workers (Table 6). Among the professional group, 81 per cent agreed that more respect from workers would help retain carers, compared to 73 per cent of the semi-professional group and 64 per cent of the voluntary group.

A statement investigating whether respondents thought the Department looked after its carers showed a similar pattern, eliciting a higher proportion of negative responses from the professional group of carers than from the other two groups.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT – CARER REMUNERATION

The relationship between various aspects of payments to carers and their perceptions of the fostering role was also explored. In relation to the adequacy of the current payment system for carers, over a third of the voluntary group thought that the level of payment was on the low side (38 per cent), this increased to 42 per cent of the semi-professional group and over half of the professional group (58 per cent) (Table 7).

The professional group was also significantly more inclined to agree that payments from the Department were often delayed and could cause hardship: 70 per cent compared to

57 per cent of the semi-professional group and 39 per cent of the voluntary group.

In relation to retaining current carers in the system, carers were asked to rate two statements on financial matters:

- 'Carer would continue if they received a higher level of subsidy' (*Care Allowance*); and
- 'Carer would continue if in lieu of paid work they were paid a fee[10] plus subsidy payment'.

For the first statement, two-thirds of the professional group (65 per cent) agreed that a higher level of subsidy would assist in retaining carers. There was more ambivalence expressed by the other groups with around half of the semi-professional group (46 per cent) and voluntary group (52 per cent) either unsure or disagreeing with the statement.

The importance of remuneration for retaining carers was confirmed by the responses of the professional group to the second statement. While a quarter of the voluntary group agreed that the payment of a fee plus a subsidy was an important factor for retaining carers, this increased to 43 per cent of the semi-professional group and more than half (53 per cent) of the professional group. Findings from a UK study indicate that carers receiving a fee plus maintenance (subsidy) were satisfied with their total payments. This satisfaction was 'strongly linked to positive ratings of support, to feeling valued as a colleague by social workers and a view that foster carers were listened to within the agency' (Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003: 49).

The conclusion to be drawn from this study ... indicates that it is time to consider whether all foster carers (including relative and kinship carers) might be entitled to more than simple reimbursement for the direct costs of children.

Key informants in a Queensland study who were supportive of the move to ensure carers received adequate remuneration for their role, suggested that the fee component for foster carers 'should be made in the form of stepped or graded payment scales reflecting foster carers' respective levels of training qualification attained' (Butcher 2004b: 47). This approach accords with the 'Payment for Skills' schemes currently operating in parts of the UK (NFCA 1996). In the UK study mentioned above, where some carers (47%) were receiving a fee, there was a high level of support from carers, social workers and service managers for a 'reward' payment for carers: 'The recurring justification for this was that foster care should be regarded as a 'job' [as carers' roles] go far beyond what could reasonably be expected from 'volunteers'' (Kirkton et al. 2003: 46). Carers in Kirkton's study who were more 'professionally oriented' were more likely to state that payment had played a part in their decision to foster and were more likely to support payments for carers (Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003: 55-57).

PAID EMPLOYMENT

The survey findings from the NSW study indicate that just over a third (36 per cent) of primary carers were in paid employment[11], and that two-thirds of these carers were working part-time. This represents a slight increase in the proportion of NSW primary carers in paid employment over the past two decades.[12]

The relationship between engagement in paid employment and carers' perception of the fostering role was explored. While the relationship was not statistically significant, the findings show that three-fifths of carers in paid employment (62 per cent) thought fostering should be semi-professional work compared to half of the carers who were *not* in paid employment (49 per cent). Almost two-fifths (37 per cent) of carers who were not in paid employment thought fostering should be professional work compared to a quarter of carers who were in paid employment (26 per cent).

It is impossible to determine from these data whether fostering commitments restrict carers' ability to engage in paid employment to a greater extent or whether women who do not have a strong attachment to the labour market are more likely to become carers. It could be surmised that carers who were *not* in paid employment felt that the demands of caring are incompatible with engagement in the labour market. Moreover, because caring was their primary activity, they may be more inclined to regard it as deserving of greater recognition as a profession. Among carers who *were* engaged in paid employment, there was still significant support for adopting a more semi-professional/professional approach to foster care. However, given their engagement in the paid labour market, they may regard their foster care

[10] A fee is a sum of money paid in addition to the *Care Allowance* as a 'reward' or 'compensation' element for providing a care service.

[11] Almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of secondary carers were in paid employment. This is broadly comparable to NSW Census data, which showed that 39.1 per cent of female carers and 69.1 per cent of male carers were in paid employment (McHugh et al. 2004).

[12] Gain, Ross and Fogg's (1987) study of NSW foster carers found that 31 per cent of foster mothers were in paid employment.

work as secondary and therefore show stronger support for a semi-professional approach to foster care.

TYPE OF FOSTER CARE UNDERTAKEN

The relationship between carers' perception of the fostering role and whether they usually undertake long-term fostering was also explored. It was hypothesised that carers who cared for a child on a long-term basis would be more likely to form an attachment to the child and regard their role as more like 'parenting' than a job (professional). While there was no statistically significant relationship between the two, the findings show that a slightly higher proportion of carers who regard the caring role as voluntary usually undertake long-term care – 77 per cent compared to 66 per cent of the semi-professional and 68 per cent of the professional group (Table 8).

Table 8: NSW carers' perception of the fostering role by long-term fostering

What fostering should be:	Usually undertake long-term fostering		Per cent
	Yes %	No %	
Voluntary work	76.8	23.2	100.0 (n=56)
Semi-professional	66.5	33.5	100.0 (n=230)
Professional	68.1	31.9	100.0 (n=138)

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study of NSW foster carers provide strong support for adopting a more professional approach to the fostering role. They show that three-quarters of the foster carers in the sample felt their current fostering role was best described as a semi-professional or professional role. The findings also show that this proportion increased when carers were asked how they felt that the role *should* be regarded.

The analysis also highlights a striking degree of divergence in how the voluntary and professional groups viewed their current role and how they thought it should be regarded. While a third of the carers (32 per cent) thought their role *should* be regarded as a professional role, only 16 per cent felt that this was how their role was best described. Similarly, only 13 per cent of respondents thought that the fostering role *should* be regarded as voluntary work, yet more than a quarter (27 per cent) thought that this was how their current role was best described.

Carers' views of how they felt the role of fostering should be considered were examined in relation to a number of socio-demographic variables and three dimensions of professionalisation identified in the literature: training, support and payment. The research findings indicate a higher level of support among the professional and semi-professional groups for the three dimensions of professionalisation of foster care examined compared to the voluntary group. While a proportion of carers in all three groups supported the dimensions of professionalisation, there was generally more support among the professional group and less among the voluntary group and, in some instances, there were relatively close degrees of convergence among the professional and semi-professional groups.

As expected, the findings suggest that carers who felt fostering should be regarded as a professional role were more likely to view training and accreditation as important elements of their role. This is perhaps unsurprising given the link between educational attainment and perceptions of the fostering role.

The responses to the questions that explored the issue of Departmental support consistently point to a higher level of dissatisfaction among the professional group. This may reflect a greater degree of divergence between how they felt the role should be considered and how they felt it actually was regarded by Departmental staff. Fewer in the professional group thought the Department looks after its carers and the issues of Departmental support, respect and respite emerged as being more important factors for retention among the professional group than among the other groups.

Payment is clearly an important dimension of the professionalisation of fostering as it reflects a recognition of the skills and time involved in the role. As expected, more carers who felt that fostering should be regarded as a professional role expressed dissatisfaction with the level of payment they received than carers in the other two groups. More carers who felt the role should be regarded as professional thought the payment they received was low and more thought that payment was often delayed. Again, their perception of how the role ought to be regarded may colour their expectations of timely payment.

CONCLUSION

The current crisis in the availability of foster carers raises important issues for the recruitment of future carers and for the retention of current carers. With the increasing labour force participation of women, the traditional pool of carers is dwindling. A potential response to the current situation would be to offer viable career opportunities in foster care, through the professionalisation of foster care. The findings of this study indicate that the majority of foster carers felt their role should be regarded as a semi-professional/ professional role. The findings also highlight the higher degree of importance accorded to issues of training, support and remuneration and their importance for carer retention among this group.

The conclusion to be drawn from this study and earlier research (McHugh 2002) indicates that it is time to consider whether all foster carers (including relative and kinship carers) might be entitled to more than simple reimbursement for the direct costs of children. Such a significant change in payment systems would, of course, have a major impact on government funding of foster care services. It is also not a straightforward issue as there is evidence in the literature that carers have mixed feelings about payments for caring work and the 'professionalisation' of foster care (Butcher 2004b; Hayden 1999; Kirkton, Beecham & Ogilvie 2003; SAFCARE 1997). However, it is evident from a review of the literature that where foster carers are being paid to foster, the quality of placements is improved, 'good outcomes' are being reported for children, and recruitment and retention of carers is not so problematic (Butcher 2004b; see also McHugh 2003). ■

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