

Welcome to the first edition of *Children Australia* for 2008. Much has been happening in recent months. We have had programs associated with parental separation announced by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) following a tender process, the Apology to our Indigenous communities, and the sector continuing to struggle to meet the complex needs of our client groups. And we have been working hard on the journal too; with planning under way for two Special Editions later in the year. But first I am compelled to say that it is not often we experience an historical event of the significance of the Australian Government's apology to Indigenous Australians made on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008 – a day to celebrate national reconciliation.



the inevitable compensation claims that will follow Rudd's speech to Parliament and the announcement of the bipartisan 'war cabinet' to 'Close the Gap'. But perhaps at last we are on a road to reconciliation and more considered actions that will address the disadvantage that has dogged our Indigenous communities for so long.

Also worthy of comment in this first Editorial for 2008 is the Conference titled 'Healthy Communities' that took place in Warrnambool, Victoria, in late February. Organised by the

Communities Southwest Alliance, this conference celebrated the coming together of some eleven, not-for-profit agencies in southwest Victoria in a partnership that sets the scene for collaborations into the future. Already this group is benefitting from joint purchasing and some administrative activities, enabling more resources to be directed to client needs. I was invited to this remarkable event as a speaker on organisational governance in the community sector, and found myself in the company of people both local and from interstate and overseas who are keen to provide services in rural and regional areas that take account of climate change and the concomitant changes to the lives of organisations and citizens, alike. The keynote speakers, Norman Swan, Robert Bland and Christine Nixon, were impressive, and the energy that emanated from delegates engaged in this event almost palpable. Hailed as a 'first', Community Southwest promises to showcase what can be achieved through grounded, inter-agency collaboration, at governance and senior management levels—a big step up from program partnerships which, as valuable as they can be, do not tread the territory of this initiative.

In this first edition for 2008, we have introduced a new section – Board Bulletin – which gives our national editorial board members an opportunity to introduce themselves to our readers, to report on their areas of interest and to bring us up to date with matters of note in their state/territory. This is followed by a number of papers and book reviews which should be of interest to a range of workers in the sector.

The first of these is a paper developed by Nettie Flaherty and Chris Goddard which reviews the 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle *Little Children are Sacred*' Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. This has become known as the *Little Children are Sacred* Report, and was released in late June 2007. The article refocuses attention on the Report through a lens of child neglect, suggesting that in limiting the terms of reference to child sexual abuse, the Report missed the opportunity to engage with the significant issue of child neglect and the practice of child protection work in cases of child neglect. This careful and thorough analysis of the Report concludes that failure to grapple with

I remember when thousands of people crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge so many years ago and at the time I thought that surely an apology would follow, but it's been a long wait. The day of National Reconciliation was an occasion that brought the nation almost to a standstill as the speeches from Parliament House in Canberra were broadcast live across the country. And it was an occasion that was deeply moving for many people; challenging to those who continue to misunderstand the imperative for this apology, and disturbing, yet a relief, to those like myself who were responsible for placing children away from their families—Aboriginal and white children alike—but so very harmful to the Indigenous children who lost so much more.

There have been voices of dissent, both before and subsequent to the apology delivered by Prime Minister Rudd. Within our own sector are those who believed what they offered to the children of Indigenous communities was better than what they would have had in the care of their families. Convinced that education and training gave Aboriginal children a chance of a decent life, some people still fail to grasp the depth of the loss caused when one's family, culture and inheritance are denied. As many Aboriginal people have tried to explain, the loss is one of identity, of knowing who you really are, and of belonging with a community, and their loss is a profoundly distressing experience that can never be allayed. Being linked to family, place and land is a much more basic human need than being educated and trained in white man's ways.

The vexed issues of Indigenous loss and the resultant poor social and health outcomes for Aboriginal people will continue to demand attention. With the disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people having extended from the time of colonisation, and white society continuing to structure itself in ways that exclude Aboriginal Australians, there is much to be done. There will be debates about services, programs and

the concept of child neglect, especially in the context of social and economic disadvantage and cultural difference, was a missed opportunity. This is especially so because the Report highlights concerns expressed by community members that inadequate care and supervision of children heighten vulnerability to child sexual abuse.

While there have been ongoing dilemmas about providing the number and range of foster care placements for children and young people needing out-of-home care, the closure of the large children's homes and orphanages couldn't come fast enough for many people. As we begin to revisit the need for residential care, the paper by Richard Hil, Joanna Penglase and Gregory Smith about the nature of slavery as it applied to children sent to orphanages is one that will no doubt attract some interest, and perhaps letters to the Editor. Their article provides a specific perspective on, and a picture of, life for children in orphanages between 1910 and 1974 in which 'slavery' is seen as an integral part of the day-to-day reality for many children. The article argues that slave labour in care settings contravened various provisions contained in welfare legislation of the period, was used to supplement the incomes of care institutions, and resulted in children often being compelled to work rather than receive the education to which they were entitled.

In Philip Gillingham and Leah Bromfield's article, the issue of blame as an 'ideology' with its roots in the discourse of the 'risk society' is conceptualised and analysed. The authors argue that blaming parents in child protection cases is perpetuated and sustained by the technology of risk assessment. They suggest that a concept of blame ideology provides additional understandings to theory, which seeks to explain the influences on decision-making in child protection practice. Child protection practitioners and commentators on child protection approaches will be interested in this argument given that there is often a tendency to focus on apportioning blame for the maltreatment of children.

Lastly, and still on the theme of child protection, Alice Brown's paper addresses the training required by pre-service teachers for reporting suspected child abuse. Her research investigates pre-service teachers' understandings of child abuse and their preparedness to deal with the signs, symptoms and disclosures of child abuse. The paper reports on the findings concerning pre-service teachers' views of their professional role in child protection and their recommendations for content to be included in their undergraduate degrees in teacher education.

Included in this edition are several book reviews, and we thank both Chris Goddard and members of the Post Placement Support Service (Vic) Inc. for providing these. Book reviews continue to be an important way in which we learn of what has been recently published and which books might need to be added to our professional libraries, whether at work or at home.

I am pleased to offer *Children Australia's* congratulations to one of our national editorial board members, David Vicary, who has been appointed Curtin Research and Teaching Fellow at Curtin University of Technology. The success of our colleagues in achievements of this nature is always worthy of comment and celebration.

Finally, I would like to especially welcome Julian Pocock, Executive Officer of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), who has agreed to join the Editorial Board this year and assist us with information and advice concerning Indigenous issues. SNAICC was established early in the 1980s and represents, and advocates for, the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. For those who are unfamiliar with the work of SNAICC, and their key reports and publications, further information is available on their website is <[www.snaicc.asn.au](http://www.snaicc.asn.au)>. The material featured provides contemporary understandings that are essential to those of us who work with Indigenous children, young people and their families.

Jennifer Lehmann

*Children Australia* is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. In order to clarify which articles have been reviewed and which have not, we now include a symbol at the end of each article as follows: ■ = peer reviewed article □ = non-reviewed article