Editorial

Jennifer Lehmann

The Olympic Games drew to a close with all the clamour of wins and losses, of national pride and fireworks. For two weeks, China held the world stage, cementing that country's economic power in people's minds and reinforcing, for some, the worrying issues of human rights. And while attention was on all things sporting, I couldn't help but be struck by the sheer cost of it all—of the training and resources for years before the event, of the uniforms and travel of all involved, of the building and development in Beijing, and of all that media coverage! In an out-of-balance world, this must surely be one of the supreme examples of how our values and priorities promote the very best, and the very worst, excesses of human behaviour. The elitism was palpable.

There is no Utopia, of course, but the Olympics, along with the unimaginable costs of various other sporting events, serve to remind me of how stingy governments are when it comes to our sector, or indeed to the future of ordinary people in a world that promises much challenge and change to come. Certainly sport, in its various forms, can be a healthy and socially developing pursuit, but it is only one of many activities that can draw people together. To my mind, it has become 'over-cooked' and exclusive, inhibiting children who happen to be disinterested and setting them apart from their peers. We are no longer living in times when a simple tunic, or top and shorts, and a coloured band across the shoulders suffice for team identity. Outfits are now beyond the budget of those on low incomes or pensions; school fees and books must take priority. And most low income folk can't continue to drive their kids about for practices and matches with petrol costs on the uphill climb.

With primary school aged kids very conscious of group memberships, I wonder how they feel when there is little to substitute for sport; little that will provide the sense of membership, identity and social connectedness. It's not that I reject sport per se—I loved playing rounders and cricket as a kid—but it's become big business, an image developer for some, and a symbol of status; another form of differentiation between people that makes them 'better' or 'less than' others with no real substance to the judgment.

So what are we to do for children who experience the disadvantage of being in out-of-home care, whose parents are not able to afford the costs of sport or whose wellbeing is compromised? Well, one can't change the world overnight, but the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) Conference 'Strong, Safe and Sustainable', held in Sydney recently, offered some clues; though playing sport was not amongst the topics. With some 800 delegates from across the nation and speakers from the UK and USA, the combined expertise was impressive. It became evident that Australian professionals, and the programs and services they deliver, are clearly holding their own with regard to outcomes for children and young people; though there is no room for complacency. Across our western democracies there are far too many children experiencing multiple placements, changing professional staff and carers, and the associated trauma that inhibits their capacity to learn. Furthermore, as elucidated by Jonathan Bradshaw, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, far too many are 'abandoned' at 18 years of age, having attained 'adulthood' in societies that, in fact, now have a quarter of their adult children continuing to live in the family home well into their twenties, and beyond.

While in Australia some agencies and their staff are committed to retaining relationships with young people throughout their emerging adulthood, the instability of placement arrangements and constantly changing staff limit the support they receive. We need to develop a more flexible repertoire for staying alongside our young adults so that we are able to overcome the impacts of mobility. Jobs are not for life, but the uncertainty embedded in our current 'contract regime' has exacerbated staff movement. If there is no certainty about one's job after the specified two or three year period, professional staff begin the search for the next contract prior to the completion of their current one. What could be more natural? After all, the mortgage still needs to be paid. And it appears no one considers leaving the job and taking the client too, in spite of the potential for client packages to allow this to occur.

The rhetoric of clients being allocated packages (funds for service purchase) should offer opportunities for clients to retain a relationship with a worker or carer via the 'new' agency so long as the worker hasn't moved an impossible distance away. When for-profit businesses recruit staff, it is not unusual for consideration to be given to the clients and relationships that the employee will bring, and they are usually thought to be of significant value. Why not in our sector? It would be an interesting experiment to see if young people experienced higher levels of continuity if such was the expectation in the SACS sector, though I wonder if there is a culture of short-termism that has crept into the helping professions—one that encourages a limiting of long-term commitment to children's wellbeing right through to the core business of maintaining relationships with them.

But back to the ACWA Conference ... and those who presented papers focussing on literacy and the importance of reading to, and with, children from a very early age offered one avenue for making a real difference. Reading with children involves being connected in a relationship of shared exploration, enjoyment and social exchange; quite apart from

the impacts this has on literacy. A number of programs promoting early reading already exist in various places across the nation, but these are not mainstream. Reading to children via radio and television is also very limited; far more so than a generation ago. Our sector may well need to collaborate more strongly with early childhood professionals to ensure the kids we work with are engaged in reading, and associated opportunities for relationships, as integral to their care.

Also of real impact at the Conference was the work of CREATE, now a national organisation. Several young people with backgrounds in out-of-home care spoke of their experiences and needs; their presentation sponsored by the NSW Department of Community Services. The resilience these young adults showed in the face of significant challenges was inspiring, but also confronting as the audience saw something of themselves and their work through the eyes of these young men and women. There is a need to collectively commit to enhancing child wellbeing as the very core of our work and we need to avoid the various other distractions that become constraining, as Dorothy Scott commented in her closing address titled 'Looking back to see ahead: From child protection to child wellbeing'.

In this edition of *Children Australia*, some of these issues are considered by the authors of the selected papers. Clare Tilbury and June Thoburn, for instance, examine out-of-home care in Australia compared to other developed countries, and explore possible explanations for differences in patterns and trends. They believe it imperative to plan and implement policies and programs that locate out-of-home care within a range of child welfare services that meet the diverse needs of children and families within local contexts. Within Australia, it is commented that NSW and Victoria are moving to more 'child well-being' early intervention models, and that this will require major shifts in resources and practitioner focus with attention to what is needed in a more 'patch-based' approach.

We have pleasure in publishing a paper from New Zealand by Robin Quigg and Claire Freeman which addresses the issue of activity for children in the light of concerns about obesity. Based on a qualitative study of 71 school-aged children in Dunedin, the study found that, whilst many children do like walking, they are not permitted to walk much, nor to many places. Some walk to school, but their overall levels of walking are low due to a combination of factors relating to concerns for their safety and to the need for children to fit in with increasingly complex, car-dependent family lives.

This is followed by a paper by Chris Klease concerning the mothers of children who are taken into protective care. The paper focuses on two core themes: firstly, the mothers' sense of betrayal when their pleas for help ultimately led to them losing their children, and, secondly, despite the resultant loss, grief and anger, their compulsion to do whatever it takes to have contact with, and to be reunited with, their children. The narratives of the mothers participating in this study carry powerful messages of loss and are a challenge to the way we practice in the light of our ethics, which encompass the need for genuine respect and acknowledgement of strengths, as well as the difficulties these women often face.

Paul Delfabbro, Mignon Borgas, Robyn Vast and Alexandra Osborn have collaborated to bring attention to the issues associated with foster parent recruitment, a topic of concern throughout Australia and beyond. Their study was carried out in South Australia following the SA Government's funding of a largely unsuccessful foster parent recruitment campaign. This retrospective survey of 347 people who made contact with the recruitment service examined several factors that might have acted as barriers to becoming a foster carer, including: perceptions of the quality of the service, the nature of the assessment process, concerns about foster care, and personal characteristics and circumstances. In their discussion, the authors raise a number of interesting ideas about future recruitment, including cross-sector collaboration, which will be of interest to those engaged in foster care programs.

In our Practice Perspectives section, Dianne Beatty and Andrew King describe a new resource called *Hey, Dad! For fathers who have a child with a disability*, which is designed to assist organisations to facilitate a program of group sessions for fathers of children with a physical, emotional or developmental disability. This brief paper describes the program, the reasons for its development and the reactions to its 2007 pilot. It appears that this program may fill a significant gap in the support of families with children with a disability and so enhance the parenting and relationship skills and resilience of participating fathers.

Our Board Bulletin in this issue features the South Australian representative on our editorial board, Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs, who takes the opportunity to highlight ongoing issues concerning child sexual abuse.

Finally, in response to inquiries about obtaining additional copies of our recent special edition on the future of residential care in Australia, published in June 2008, we have included an order form at the end of this issue.

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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