

# REPORT ON THE 5TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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This was the fifth International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect that I have attended, others have been held in Geneva, Paris, Amsterdam and London. The 5th International Congress of Child Abuse and Neglect was held in Montreal, Quebec, Canada in September 1984. In keeping with the Congress theme, which emphasised community responsibility for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, organisers, agencies, professionals and citizens who contributed to the congress and represented different levels of Government and various sectors of the community; thus a broad cross section of the people involved. Prevention is the only way of reducing child abuse and neglect. The aim of the conference was to bring together preventative strategies from both professionals and self help agencies. Child abuse is a community responsibility. Every child has the right to be protected "against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation". Workers in the field recognise that the help they bring to families is too little too late, and that we cannot rely on judicial strategies to reduce child abuse. Times are difficult, resources are strained, this affects service delivery, and brings increasing stress to the family, making them more vulnerable to breakdown. The U.S.A. spends \$2 billion a year on treating the problem and only \$2 million a year on preventative activities.

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect of Children, which was responsible for organising this congress, was founded in 1977 and is dedicated to the prevention of cruelty to children in every nation. It provides a forum for the discussion of experiences and the sharing of knowledge to increase international collaboration.

In recent years there has been an ever-enlarging amount of knowledge on how to identify and treat cases of child abuse and, greater awareness in the community. Despite this, numbers of reported cases continue to increase. New approaches are urgently needed. Violence concerns us all and when it is against children, our most precious resource, great effort is worthwhile. Neighbourhood isolation and lack of co-hesion in society, economic stress including high unemployment, violence in society and societal values all put stress on families and play a part in the incidence of child abuse.

The International Congress explored the topic from three main standpoints:

1. Tertiary education — prevention and treatment to reduce the negative effects of abuse intervention.
2. Secondary prevention (early identification and treatment).

3. Primary prevention (programmes to promote well being).

Aspects discussed included sexual, physical and emotional abuse, and neglect and exploitation. There were 2000 delegates at the congress, more than 700 papers were submitted, and 500 delivered to delegates. The programme was divided into four sections, the individual, the family, the community and the professionals. Among invited speakers were Jean Louis Beaugoin, Professor of Law at Montreal University; Leonard Borman, founder of the Self Help Centre in Illinois, U.S.A.; Dom Helder Camara, Human Rights spokesman for Brazil; Jean Claude Chesnais, a French historian who spoke of the history of violence in a keynote address; Anne Cohen from the U.S.A., Director of the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse; Pauline Maris, former Minister responsible for Statistics of the Status of Women and Minister of Security and income; David J. Roy, Director of Montreal Centre for Bio-Ethics; and Sydney Seagle Professor of Paediatrics, Canada, who in another keynote address discussed the ethical issues in child abuse. Dr. Roy at the conclusion of his presentation, suggested that society may have to consider parenthood as a profession, only with adequate training of parents will the incidence of child abuse decrease.

Special features organised by the congress council facilitated the meeting of delegates who were working in the same area or professional capacity of community activity, and also gave delegates access to a wide study on sexual offences in Canada against children and youth. A luncheon was sponsored by the Business Community of Montreal, which encouraged business and human service personnel to become partners in prevention, co-operating with community groups and citizen trust, so, together they can stamp out child abuse while Government resources are tied up with investigative, medical and protection service costs, mostly after abuse has occurred, companies can support preventative activities in the workplace.

An ecumenical service was held on the first afternoon to open the congress, and a community forum, held on the second night, was open to the public. Doctor Richard Goldbloom from Canada, Physician in Chief and Director of Research at Halifax gave the closing address at the community forum, which he entitled "where do we go from here?" This final address was dedicated to Professor Henry Kemp who has done so much for children at risk. The final day of the congress was for Canadians to address interests which concerned them.

The congress was both efficiently and

smoothly organised and most interesting to attend. Each day began with a keynote presentation in both English and French, the important issues emanating from that session were then presented in simultaneous discussion sessions for audiences of 300. There were panel discussions with multi-disciplinary representation, problem solving, debates and discussion groups, clinical and research workshops. Poster sessions were organised to allow groups to present their work and discuss it with interested persons. Exhibitions of the latest educational material, equipment and publications were on display, films and audio visual programmes were shared with the congress delegates.

The congress was held in the centre of Montreal's newly completed convention centre which is superbly situated and catered most effectively for disabled people. Social activities of the congress included "coffee, croissants and conversation" to begin the congress at 8.30 a.m. on Monday morning, this set a very warm atmosphere for the proceedings that followed. Quebec city is rich in cultural heritage with beautiful scenery displaying brilliant colours, trips to the Laurentain Mountains and New England were available to delegates.

Although the congress, perhaps said nothing new, it was a worthwhile refresher experience. Many problems identified are still unresolved.

1. The rights of parents versus the rights of children.
2. The protection of the foetus, which will become a major issue as time goes on.
3. Issues surrounding the quality of life.
4. The recognition that the law cannot solve everything social.
5. We have actually moved a long way from when there was no control over life and even less over death, yet today, "you can still kill somebody without actually taking their life".
6. Has society the right to take away children identified as at risk, but without any evidence of abuse? It is sad that children have to be abused before child protection workers can actually get started.
7. How do we distinguish between those parents who are going to be "good" parents and those who are not going to cope? How do we evaluate the competency of parents?
8. A question of labelling a person an abuser and not giving such a person a chance to be different in a different relationship, or with a different child, is a real problem. There is still the issue of the change in attitude and the development of respect for others which is essential.

9. Some parents are willing that their children be taken into care but reverse the decision when neighbours question how they could possibly do such a thing. Such societal attitudes make prevention impossible.

To provide a source of money for preventative actions, Ray Helfer had an excellent idea, which was to develop a National Trust for children, whereby marriage and birth certificates would be taxed an extra \$10.00 which would be especially allocated for the prevention of child abuse and not be put into general revenue. This would make resources available, and the community would be able to see where their money was going, and they would feel they were contributing to children and their protection.

The need to have mastery over others may be telling us that that person has very little mastery over themselves. One of the challenges of life is to accept its difficulties and its discipline. For social workers there remains the thankless task of intruding into other peoples lives, where children are thought to be a great risk yet still trusting in people's ability to change their behaviour and their attitudes. We must all be very clear about our commitment to the welfare of children, as the responsibility is ours as part of the community.

Continued from Page 25.

— What about self-management by various groups? Aboriginal groups are involved in such a process. If you are prepared to accept my definition of women's refuges as providing a type of child care, refuges too are self-managed groups.

— What about self-management or a large measure of it by children — particularly adolescents? Some African societies have what are termed age set systems. At puberty, the girls and boys move from home into separate, segregated living until they marry. I feel such a system must have messages for us (as a parent of adolescent children, the idea has strong attractions at times).

— Are we still dealing at times with the disapproval by the middle class of the way the working class bring up their children? We see these tensions in work with Aboriginal people — is it just less notices for others? That we are learning to let go suggests that less paternalistic attitudes can be learned — but, significantly the game has been brought to us by the Aboriginal community. There is no such unity in our clientele.

— Why is it that boarding schools are likely to turn out the leaders of the land when children's homes, which may resemble them quite closely in the type of

care offered, tend not to?

— How can traditional forms of philanthropic organisation be revamped to meet objectives of participation and self-determination?

— Some forms of care will certainly be necessary in the immediate future. How can we ensure that this is as user-friendly as possible? Here we need to listen to the children — flexibility of rules, their own space and own things are some things we know they find important. Doubtless there are others which we may not all be aware of.

The final points are quite disconnected. I make no apology for this because I feel that at times our thinking gets locked in to old patterns and we need to try some lateral thinking to question the taken-for-granted. Today provides us with an opportunity to do just this, and I am eager to hear your views.

## REFERENCES

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# BOOK LAUNCH

**The Hon. Mr. Justice R.S. Watson launched "The Family Law Case Book" on the 30th January, 1985. The launching was held at the Victorian Children's Aid Society, Black Rock, and was attended by many people associated with the Children's Bureau. Of the authors, Frank Bates is Reader in Law at the University of Tasmania and J. Neville Turner, Senior Lecturer in Law at Monash University and President of The Children's Bureau of Australia.**

**The Casebook is dedicated to Pearl Watson. The following is the address given by Mr. Justice Watson.**

My incursions into law teaching have over the years been spasmodic and provocative. Therefore, notwithstanding my possession of a comprehensive library which contains several case books, I really had to ask around to ascertain what are the attributes of a good case book.

Firstly, it has to be readable — understandable not only by the esoteric lawyer but comprehensible by the legal novice, the inter-disciplinary co-worker and the intelligent layman. This book clearly fulfils that function. Bates and Turner have achieved clarity and readability.

Secondly, it has to be eclectic and all-embracing. Not encyclopaedic but touching on all relevant matters. This book does. It ranges across the spectrum of what

people should be thinking about when they speak of family law. This book qualifies. In particular in the chapters dealing with the child it has grappled with the past, the confused present, and adumbrated the problems of the future.

Thirdly, it has to be provocative. Not in the sense of flying kites or supporting the self-serving bootlace-stretching enthusiasms beloved of so many academicians, but raising clear, pertinent and challenging issues not only for the student but the thinking reader. This book does that.

Fourthly, to avoid fossilisation, a good case book has to be open ended. So much law teaching frames and encloses the mind within parameters from which in later life not even judges escape. This book contains many challenges. The reader should never feel that any answer is final. Law dealing with such human issues as the family and children can never offer final answers.

Fifthly, a good case book permits a certain indulgence — if the authors are experienced in reputation, as these authors are, they are permitted to quote copiously from their former writings. Again the authors have fully accepted the privilege of such indulgence.

When I began practising family law over 30 years ago, three totally misguided principles appeared to be axiomatic:

1. Marriage was a patriarchy in which both parties were boxed in for life.
2. When a marriage broke down one

party was innocent and the other was guilty.

3. Children were part of the matrimonial assets to be shunted around along with the property.

It is one of the principal satisfactions of my life to note the tremendous and fruitful changes that have occurred in the field of family law and to know that constructively I, along with many others, have been part of them.

Family law is one area of legal, in fact cross-disciplinary, endeavour which must never fossilise. To slightly change a Biblical text we must proceed with minds wide open to the mercies of compassion. The whole subject is too complex, too human, too demanding to be diverted by media trivialisation or retarded by conservative judgmentalism that seeks to leech the last drop of blood from every tragedy.

The dedication of this book reflects a more constructive view of tragedy. On 4th July, 1984 my wife was murdered in the destruction of my home by a terrorist's bomb. Frank and Neville have dedicated this book to Pearl. My family and I are deeply honoured by this dedication. As a marriage counsellor and honorary librarian to UNIFAM in Sydney, Pearl was devoted to the spirit of compassion and service that some of us have perceived as the basic nurture of the law's service to the family. I am particularly gratified that copies of this book will grace the shelves of the Pearl Watson Memorial Library at UNIFAM.

It gives me great pleasure officially to launch "The Family Law Case Book" by Frank Bates and Neville Turner.