



PREFACE to the article SYSTEMS FOR MANAGING CHILD MALTREATMENT IN AUSTRALIA

It is a pleasure to write an introduction to Peter Boss's article "The Systems for Managing Child Maltreatment in Australia". In 1987 he has taken up a position of Director of the Children's Bureau of Australia, a small independent organisation which has struggled for some years to present a national view of child and family health and welfare. Unfortunately, Federal governments in Australia have not taken a national view of child and family health, abrogating their responsibilities by leaving it to the States and the comforting philosophy of "She'll be right mate". The hard and disquieting facts are that in 1982 Australia rated second last of 21 O.E.C.D. countries in economic assistance to average income families, and since 1972, Federal funding for child health has been implemented by no less than 7 different branches of either the Health or Social Services Departments. Also, there are significant inequalities in child health in Australia and compared with other countries we could do better.

For many years Peter Boss has been concerned about our relative indifference in protecting and preventing many children from neglect and maltreatment, compared to the enthusiasm for developing expensive high technology for a few organ transplants in children with a rare disease in which the outcome is doubtful. He clearly outlines the essentials of a good child protection system on pages 3 and 4 and in the last recommendation, number 8, makes a very important point that the protecting system should not be isolated from the others helping the child and family services. Integrated primary services are essential for identification of families with infants and young children who are in difficulties and for providing early prevention and protection.

Just as there are many factors in child and family malfunction resulting in neglect and

maltreatment, so there are different ways of preventing and protecting children. Comparison of different systems in different States offers one way of determining which is more successful, or of little or no value. However, it should be pointed out that a broadly based State system may fail to take account of differences in local areas, such as high rise flats or fringe areas in large cities. Individual systems to meet specific needs may be necessary. One such system has been developed in North Melbourne, a high rise flat area, where a nurse, Adele Brain, has been working with a few paid assistants and a group of volunteers, attracting alienated families in difficulties, many of whom are sole parents, to a family and child centre, teaching them simple skills, helping them to learn from each other, providing a place where they can build their confidence and understand their children. It has been very successful for a number of families.

Finally, I am reminded of a story about a missionary society in a large city in the United States of America who sent a dedicated young evangelist to Africa. He was exhorted to furnish the Society with regular reports of his work and progress. After failure to answer a number of letters from the Society he was sent a terse reminder, which ended "If you are unable to provide a report we regret we will be unable to support you financially". A shorter and even more terse reply came back "Can do the job, or talk about it. Am doing the job". It is surely time for Australia, its States, its bureaucracies and committees of inquiry into child neglect and maltreatment to stop talking about it, and get on with the job.

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