editorial

Mr. John Smith

Mr. John Smith is the Director of the Grassmere Youth Guidance Centre in Doveton. Grassmere is a unique program designed for the treatment of young offenders within the community. He is also a member of the Children's Welfare Association Executive.

HAIL "THE NEW BREED"

When Toffler wrote "We have in time, released a totally new social force — a stream of change so accelerated that it influences our sense of time . . ." it is a little unlikely that he had in mind the residential child care scene in Australia.

While some of the articles in this edition of the Journal point to new approaches and dimensions in child care, it could be argued that little has changed in the way we care for children since the turn of the century. Often, unfortunately the greatest reactionaries to change have been the traditional, well-established voluntary agencies and the government departments.

Child welfare programmes are part of and tied to the historical development of the community in which they exist. Each state can trace its own quite unique development. However, while it is obvious that the range and quality of the services, the patterns of government funding are quite diverse, it is possible to identify a quite unmistakable trend that appears to be gaining ground in all the States.

The indicators of this new development are many and varied — regionalization, the increasing interest in family support programmes, the rise of self-help groups, the rennaissance of volunteer support services, day care, the development of programmes for the unemployed, community based treatment for young offenders. These new initiatives have taken us past the concern for the child-in-the-family to a concept of the family-within-the-community. Dr. Denham Grierson has outlined this trend in his paper in the last edition of the Journal.

What is a matter of concern is that many long established voluntary agencies throughout Australia, appear to be locked into a particular set of services, often including residential care, foster care, etc., a traditional modus-operandi and functioning at quite a different level than the "new breed" agencies that appear to be responding to the new community initiatives in child welfare service delivery.

Those threatened by this new direction usually claim that there will always be children who will need to be removed from their families and therefore there will always be a need for traditional services. The question then that these people must ask themselves is, "will the sort of services that these agencies offer, i.e. often unchallenged, often geographically distant, often unrelated to societal demands and unresponsive to the local community, be the type of facility in which the community will want to place its children?"

At the present time traditional voluntary agencies are, with some well known exceptions, being generously funded by the State, and this may tend to instil a false sense of security. Funds are available to these agencies simply because there are not adequate alternatives being offered. But alternatives are developing, and with a change in the winds of opinion, some agencies could find themselves out on a limb. Government funding at present, supports the status-quo by refusing sufficient funding to new locally based initiatives, but this too will change as the ground swell for community based services develops.

Over the past three years, the children's home population has dropped by 1,000 in Victoria and 1,200 in New South Wales — the trends have been even more dramatic in South Australia. The recent Committee of Enquiry in Victoria indicated that the Research and Statistics Division had found that 55% of the children presently in residential care in that State "could be maintained otherwise if there were resources available".

There is every indication that a new and exciting development in community concern is about to take place. Government departments and traditional voluntary agencies, with few exceptions, have shown that they are unresponsive, unmotivated and uninvolved.