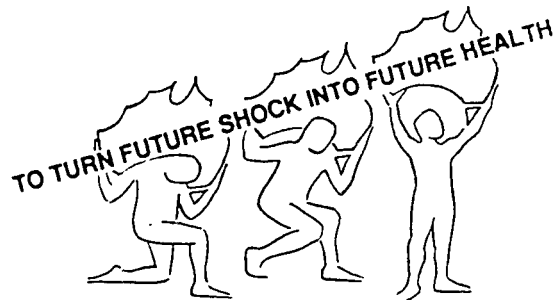


The Australian Association for Adolescent Health National Biennial Conference

A report by Cathy Italiano



The theme of the conference was 'Future Shock into Future Health'. Hazel Hawke, Brian Burdekin, Helen Tolstoshev, Tricia Szirom, David Bennett, Richard Lockersley and Mark "Jacko" Jackson were among the guest speakers over the three days.

One of the highlights of the conference was Brian Burdekin's paper entitled 'Power, Politics and Youth Stress' in which he talked about his experience of the inflexibility of government departments. He forcefully attacked governments for their endless bureaucratic guidelines which tend to become nothing more than inflexible rules which often impeded effective action in relation to young people's health. Youth homelessness is a perfect example of a product of this inflexibility. He also spoke at length about the need for more prevention programs as an effective means of addressing many of the problems faced by young people. However, he highlighted the difficulties associated with attempting to persuade governments to fund prevention programs, the results of which are so difficult to quantify and qualify. Nevertheless, Burdekin maintains that governments should be convinced that it is more cost effective to spend money on prevention rather than spending it on programs that provide only temporary solutions to the problems. Homeless youth was again used as an example.

Another highlight of the conference was the participation of so many young people who were involved not only in the workshops and seminars, but also in productions of drama, music and art.

One of the most spontaneous and thought-provoking events was a rally, organised by the young people with some adult support, which occurred in response to the poor media coverage of the conference. It was reported to the conference that the rally had been successful in explaining to various reporters that the participants felt it was unfair that the youth conference had received so little media attention. They wanted to let people know that, as young people, they had thoughts, feelings and opinions and that they had a right to be heard. It was evident from the young people who had participated in this event that they had experienced a tremendous sense of excitement, togetherness and satisfaction, but, more importantly, had demonstrated that they had the power to initiate some positive action, with the cooperation and assistance of adults.

The finale of the conference was most appropriate - the young people invited all the adults onto the stage to sing John Farnham's song 'You're the Voice'.

The conference covered a very diverse range of interesting topics. However, in my view, it attempted to deal with too many issues, thus providing insufficient depth in their coverage.

I believe the challenge for the 1992 AAAH conference in Melbourne will be to have young people from a range of cultural, social and educational backgrounds organising and participating in the conference. Further, the challenge for the 1990s is to give everyone with a stake in the future, especially young people and children, a voice which can be heard.

Final year social work student Cathy Italiano represented the NCBA at the national conference of the Australian Association for Adolescent Health (AAAH), which was held in Perth on 28-30 November 1990.