

Much is happening in the child and family sector, both in Australia and overseas, with continued dissatisfaction about the frequency of less than optimal outcomes for children. I will return to this topic in a moment, but first, one final comment on the contribution of governance and its influence in organisational life that continues to concern me. A key question is, what are the direct and indirect influences of governance arrangements on the children and families with whom we work?



Adding to the debate on governance, I would like to raise the issue of agency 'ownership' — which is, of course, another of considerable complexity. I have recently wondered how it is that the not-for-profit sector has never embraced the notion of agencies being owner-operated by individual, or groups of, professionals. In terms of responsibility for reporting to funding bodies and to the public whose taxes are being used, and being financially accountable, there would surely be little difference. Arrangements for payment of salaries and other costs are unlikely to alter significantly given contemporary contractual arrangements; and with savings made in the time and costs committed to servicing Boards, it might be that owner-operated agencies are more effective and efficient. Any 'surplus' gained through such savings would be returned to the organisation and client services given the not-for-profit status of the agency.

Such a model is similar to law and medical practices in which partners own and work within a company structure, usually with the same high commitment to its success and reputation as community service professionals. The decision-making processes have the advantage, in many instances, of being closer to the day-to-day operations of the practice or agency. Developing such a model as an alternative for not-for-profit services would avoid the privatisation approach which, during the 1990s, saw a number of commercial businesses consider, and win, human service contracts with a view to achieving profit for shareholders.

The belief that charitable organisations are, and should be, owned by the communities they serve is one with which we are familiar. However, governance now ranges from being quite remote and, in a number of cases, not located within the communities being served (as in the case of some of the large church and metropolitan providers); while others tend to be overly conservative and grounded in narrow views of welfare that are locally acceptable. In addition, tensions emerge between professional understandings of community and client needs and how to 'grow' an agency, and those of Board members who have different imperatives and visions.

The structural arrangements pursued by government have given rise to some major amalgamations over recent years resulting in a smaller number of very powerful organisations. I'm not sure the economies of scale and other such

arguments have been realised, but as time moves us all forward, perhaps there will be a moment when another arrangement will be seen as a viable alternative worthy of consideration; and for which some professionals in the field might be prepared.

Moving to other topics both in Australia and overseas, I note that the Children's Commissioner for England, Professor Al Aynsley-Green, is giving a keynote address at the 7th International Looking After Children Conference to be held in Sydney (14th -16th August 2006). His address on Tuesday 15th August is titled *Achieving well-being for*

children at risk or in care and will consider the improvement of 'outcomes for vulnerable children and young people through action at systemic, organisational and individual levels, with reference to the UK National Services.'

Professor Al Aynsley-Green was appointed in July 2005 and has, more recently, appointed his management team. With a budget of £3m, the Office of the Children's Commissioner is due to launch its new website in a few weeks. For those interested, the UK Framework, the 'Every Child Matters' program, is currently promoting a number of key focus areas, one of which is multi-agency service delivery. The website <<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/deliveringservices/multiagencyworking/>> provides five Toolkits for managers and practitioners to support their work. Also available is a checklist of success factors for multi-agency working.

Also interesting to note are the findings of the United Nations World Youth Report (2005) which we should have alerted readers to last year. Young people in the age range of 15 to 24 years make up 18% of the world's population and 85% live in developing countries. Young people below the age of 15 years make up another 30% of the world's population. Over 200 million young people live in poverty with 113 million not at school and 130 million illiterate; 88 million unemployed and 10 million living with HIV/AIDS — an appalling situation. The Report also highlights five new issues affecting the lives of young people since 1995, these being:

- globalisation;
- increased use of information and communication technology;
- spread of HIV/AIDS;
- increased participation of young people in armed conflict, both as victims and perpetrators;
- growing importance of intergenerational relations in an ageing global society.

Further information is available on the website: <<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr05.htm>>

Back in Australia, Andrew McCallum's appointment to the role of CEO of the peak body, the Association of Child

Welfare Agencies (ACWA) in NSW has been announced and he will take up the position in early June.

Turning to this issue of *Children Australia*, Judy Cashmore and her colleagues, Daryl Higgins, Leah Bromfield and Dorothy Scott, highlight current concerns about the status and contribution of Australian research in the child protection and out-of-home care areas. Noting that there have been two audits completed over the last decade, the authors express concern that many studies continue to be small scale, whilst there is a need 'for multi-site, cross-jurisdictional studies; and closer collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners to close the gap between what we know and what we do'. The increase in notifications and substantiations of abuse is alarming and provides a strong rationale for critical study not only of how we can best provide care and interventions for children and their families, but of the reasons underpinning the current situation. No doubt they are complex, but one wonders if the sheer pace of life, the tendency to quick and short-term solutions, and the differences in access to wealth in Australia are accentuating the difficulties of disadvantaged groups. Certainly, there is a need for extensive and long-term investigation in these fields of practice.

Also included in this edition are some particularly interesting papers that seek to provide an overview of our understandings in specific areas of child and family work. A paper by Reesa Sorin and Greta Galloway, 'Constructs of childhood: Constructs of self', discusses ten constructs and their implications for professional practice and decision-making. As we become familiar with routine ways of working with children and young people, we often forget that our practices are a result of our beliefs and orientations to the notion of childhood which need to be challenged as we continue to develop best practice. Another paper which provides an overview of practice is that by Emer Dunne and Lisa Kettler in which the literature concerning kinship care is reviewed. As government policies and programmatic approaches are developed in out-of-home care, there has been increasing attention to those situations in which children are placed with extended family members in the belief that they are better served by being with family. This

paper raises some of the issues drawn from research as to the evidence for our beliefs in this regard.

The paper developed by Ann Graham and Robyn Fitzgerald revisits the issue of children and their engagement in family dissolution processes. Children's contributions to decision-making are often seen as problematic by practitioners and the perspective taken in this article proposes that children 'to and fro' as they cope with family separation and divorce. It may also be relevant to how children think about, and cope with, being placed in out-of-home care contexts as practitioners have long noted what appears to be 'mind changing' with associated 'storying' that children and young people exhibit in these contexts.

Finally, Lesley Leece reports on a Queensland study into the use of volunteer Parent Aide support for parents with a history of substance abuse. This work contributes to the ongoing debates about how best to provide support that is both acceptable to parents and effective, while meeting best practice standards. Volunteer programs have proliferated over the last decade which may, in part, be the result of pressures to meet demands in a climate of fiscal restraint. However, our industry has a significant history and some agencies have well-established and successful programs that are volunteer-based. Clearly, we can continue to learn from critical reflection of their practices.

Two book reviews are included in this edition. We remind those of you who have read any recently published books which might be of interest to other *Children Australia* readers that we would welcome a review.

In September we look forward to publishing a special edition of the journal with a focus on work emerging from the 'Towards Better Outcomes for Young People Leaving State Care' Conference held at Monash University, Melbourne, in November 2005. Our guest editors from Monash University will be Dr Philip Mendes, Department of Social Work, and Dr Catherine Forbes, Department of Econometrics and Business Statistics.

Jennifer Lehmann

Children Australia is a refereed journal – all papers submitted are peer reviewed to assess their suitability for publication. Peer reviewed papers are expected to meet contemporary academic standards. However, at the discretion of the editor, papers which have not been reviewed are published from time to time. Such papers may include: short commentaries on practice issues that are essentially based on observation and experience; reports on program approaches, initiatives or projects that are both short and unreferenced; historical overviews; short papers that respond to a peer reviewed article published in an earlier edition which adds to informed debate or provides an alternative perspective. It is anticipated that no more than one such paper would be included in each issue.

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

Children Australia, Volume 31, Number 1

Our apologies to those subscribers who received a faulty copy of the previous edition of *Children Australia* (Vol 31 No 1). Please let us know, if you haven't already done so, and we will send you a replacement copy.

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