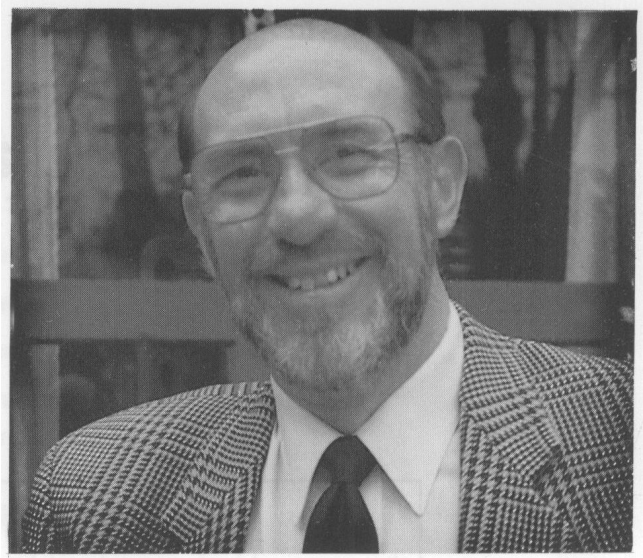


Editorial

Lloyd Owen



With 1997 we strike a gap in the United Nations designated International Years. Next year is the year of the ocean, a chance to focus on environmental issues, while 1999 returns to social issues with a focus on the elderly. Perhaps this year can be one for generally taking stock. That would be in keeping with the prevailing orthodoxy which demands that dollars which do not clearly help to make more dollars be carefully targeted to saving dollars. *Children Australia* has adopted a plain cover format this year, for now it is less costly and is in keeping with most other journals of its kind. On the international front there is a changing of the guard, a new Secretary-General of the United Nations, and some new commitments from member nations while, as ever, many serious social, economic and environmental concerns remain for the world's children.

In Australia we now have our first government report on compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (available from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department). We have an NGO sponsored alternative report (available from Defence for Children International) and we have a new inquiry under way. It does make sense across our eight state and territory jurisdictions in Australia to connect firmly to international standards and to develop national standards such as the National Baseline Standards for Out of Home Care. These things can act as a guide to those working at the coalface. They can also help with the resource and policy making climate at national, state and local government levels so necessary for family and community well-being. In 1997 there is much dramatic reshaping of policy going on at each of these levels of government. Vigilance will be needed to minimise the usual tendency to shift responsibility up and down the levels. Support for the well-being of children belongs on the agenda of all our social institutions. Child-centred, family-focussed services are part of the vision being expressed by the Victorian Department of Human Services – the words do embody some ideas worth spreading. Last year saw some strengthening of national interest and advocacy groups, including the Australian Association for Young People in Care (AAYPIC) and the Child and Family Welfare

Association of Australia (CAFWAA). An Australasian conference, *Children's Rights: The Next Step*, is being held in Queensland in April.

It is apparent that economic issues will again dominate this year. Australian governments have all adopted the tenets of the National Competition Policy and some massive experiments are taking place in the realm of privatising, outsourcing and paying for services. Unit costing is becoming part of the jargon and on the continuum of inputs, throughputs, outputs and outcomes (a rough representation of a systems approach), we all talk about outcomes but have rarely managed to attach our costing to anything better than outputs. In some instances organisations are being radically restructured around roles of purchasing services. Much hard thinking is going on in relation to how to provide services as efficiently as possible and how to think more often in terms of market language and competitive tendering. In many instances economics and competition have forced agency mergers and restructuring into bigger, flatter entities. Along with the new visions, cultures and loyalties, there is a need to find ways of coping with the attendant conflict, pain, grief and loss. In all our re-ordering, our actions need to match the rhetoric to avoid losing touch with client need and customer focus.

A look at the world of management and markets brings us face to face with what appears to be the institutionalisation of uncertainty and change. One might speculate that it is chaos theory at work. A pattern often apparent though is the declaration that what is, can no longer be afforded. A shrunken budget follows to be balanced by downsizing, concentrating functions and locations and increasing throughput. Regardless of its true merits, within this driven scenario, there appear to be some interesting threads of hope. The notion of the learning organisation and the self-organising system uses new understandings of the working of the human brain as a metaphor. As we are dazzled by the exponential growth of the electronic world and the information bombardment in its many forms, we begin to recognise new possibilities in the similarities and the differences between things. We can be remarkably adaptable

within fairly broad limits. With our differences we can each make unique contributions to the working of our world, with our similarities we can share understanding and experiences with others. In a sense too the micro reflects the macro and as we find with DNA the parts carry the seeds of the whole, or the image of the hologram reflects the commonality in its parts. Before giving way to cynicism, we should look again and ask what it is that we must do for children and what we have in the nineties which makes us better able to do it?

The theme of the CWAV/CAFWAA conference being held in November this year is *The Cutting Edge*. There is now much more research output from the child, youth and family welfare field around the world; info tech makes it easier to collate larger data sets which can sometimes answer bigger questions, and it is now easier for us to disseminate information in a variety of forms. So much so that institutions are emerging whose task it is to distil the vast array of information. In many instances our problem is not a dearth but an overload. Many of these tools get their greatest use for private interests; a challenge is to find ways of ensuring that they also serve the public interest and the needs of the less powerful. Dorothy Scott draws attention in this issue to the role being played by philanthropic trusts such as the Ian Potter Foundation.

Other contributors to this issue continue to plug away at the task of sharing their research, their experience and their thinking. Ross Hyams examines, with an emphasis on shortcomings, the child support scheme which has now had ten years of operation. Addressing the needs of children in the context of separation and divorce is a major issue for society and finding mechanisms which work well to minimise the risk of harm is a clear need. One aspect involves management of contact between each of the parents and children. Contact centres in France and Australia are the subject of an article by Emilia Renouf, a reminder that interesting models are often to be found in other than English-speaking countries and that parallels are often operating in Australia. The search for a suitable risk management approach and some inter-agency workshops to enhance inter-agency collaboration through common understanding is the subject of an article by a group experienced in child protection work and staff development, Lynne McPherson, Noel Macnamara and Craig Hemsworth, all members of the Department of Human Services child protection staff development team in Victoria. Mike Clare from Western Australia reports on the British 'Looking after children' practice and management materials. He traces the development of these tools, the interest they have sparked internationally and their trial in Western Australia. The potential of this carefully developed, comprehensive system for assessment, case planning and review has been taken up in a number of Australian states. Stuart Evans and Libby Dyer report on a survey of foster care agencies in Victoria which examined selection and induction strategies for foster families. The use of group information sessions to aid self selection is highlighted as is the importance of worker continuity in family retention and maintaining commitment

through early placement difficulties. Chris Goddard again reflects on media reporting of events and, to continue his cricket analogy, the 'spin' which different reporters or newspapers may give to a story.

Lloyd Owen

**BRIEF REPORTS OF ITEMS OF INTEREST
FOR AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
ARE NEEDED NOW**

Lloyd Owen, in addition to being editor of *Children Australia*, has been nominated as a contributing editor for the journal *Community Alternatives: International Journal of Family Care*. The journal is published by Human Service Associates, St Paul, Minnesota USA, but has an extensive international list of editors.

The task involves collecting brief notes of program innovations, research and items of interest in the child, youth and family welfare field. We are seeking to increase the content from Australia, New Zealand and other countries in the Asia - Pacific region. Items should generally be about 500 - 1500 words.

If you or colleagues have something to contribute, forward, fax or email them without delay to:

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