



Editorial

OThe pencilling of this editorial began in the damp tropical warmth of the Kandyan foothills of Sri Lanka. A place called Kegalle. It is Poya, full moon night, a holiday, a time when the predominantly Buddhist community of Sri Lanka celebrate Buddha's enlightenment. Some of my time has been spent tramping the steep tracks among the picturesque villages which fan out from the roads around the terraced rice paddies and up into the mountains among the rubber plantations. Many children have been visible. Generally, as in Australia they are being closely cared for by mother, father or elder siblings and in many instances by extended family members and neighbours as well. Games of cricket are often in evidence and the near universal striking white school uniforms. One is also constantly struck by issues of worth and work, for this is a country suffering a war and an embattled economy which holds a significant proportion of the population in the dire straits of poverty. The differential values placed on human activity and the reference points one has for gauging self worth are thrown into sharp relief by the competition to make ends meet and to get a bit ahead.

A brief stroll in the moonlight brings the magic of fireflies among the tall silhouettes of coconut palms and the broad leaves of banana trees. Resounding reminders of bountiful nature but also of environmental concerns and the precious heritage we steward for our children and future generations – concerns which are an issue here with small plot dependency and market prices falling for some cash crops. The work which brings me here relates to attempts by the responsible government agency and the International Labour Organisation, to mitigate the social problems associated with the large number of women who see selling their labour overseas in domestic service as their only option to provide adequately for their family. Many thousands from this and other countries do, even when it means leaving their own children in the care of someone else for two or four years or more. Many perceive it as the better of poor alternatives. Interest connects me also to

significant local concerns about destitution, child labour, child prostitution and other products of poverty, war and human distress or exploitation.

In encounters with village life one wonders about the logic of making people more dependant on remote sources of supply of food, energy and other necessities instead of using technology to aid self sufficiency for individuals and households. In some cultures self worth has attached to one's ability to provide for one's own household and to have enough to share with others. Many questions emerge also about a sense of reciprocity and obligation. Is it possible to promote independence and self sufficiency and retain life enhancing communal-ity? One is reminded in some encounters that community is also controlling and sometimes crushing in its concern. Stigma and rejection may lead to being abandoned or to suicide. In any society there are rights and obligations, norms and margins and sensitivities flowing from our world view.

This issue of Children Australia is predominantly concerned with behavioural boundaries, our attitudes and behaviour towards children and some aspects of child protection. The Australian community's awareness of child abuse and neglect has been expanding rapidly in recent years. Each State and Territory jurisdiction has responded with legislation and services. Both understanding and models of service are still evolving and practitioners bearing the responsibility for assessment and action are acutely conscious of risk attending both action and inaction. Media interest and numerous enquiries have resulted in much procedural prescription and heavy reliance on the court as a solution to the dilemmas. Mandatory reporting for certain professional groups is nearly universal in the Australian jurisdictions. In itself, like the Court, it will not provide a solution to the problem – reliance on either will, in some cases, do great harm. Nor will the presence of an investigatory team alone provide the solution, in some cases they will be harmful. Like the parent who can migrate to sell her skills as a housemaid, the option may be to judge which of the harms is the lesser. Hopefully the decis-

ions about what services to provide will flow from the best available knowledge and from a genuine interest in the safety and long term well being of children, not narrow sectarian or short term political interests or what is cheapest.

The articles give some indication of the breadth of issues to be explored to glean the knowledge needed. In each case, they point to the risk of misapprehension in this threatening and emotive field. We have much to learn about preventing the abuse of power; about enhancing the positive power in family life; about managing the impact of mass communication; about managing our sexuality in today's world; about understanding each other and finding win win solutions to the problems which beset our children and each other; about discovery of better perspectives through open discussion of difficult issues. Freda Briggs and Russell Hawkins have provided some interesting research pointing to the way in which parents may perpetuate their children's vulnerability to sexual abuse through a mismatch of common morés and risks and the need to appreciate differences in the perception of children at different developmental stages. Bala Mudaly reports on a support group program for parents of adolescents based on a systems approach. It appears to be a positive, dynamic and empowering approach to capitalise on the resources inherent in the family members and the internal and external family environment. Frank Bates has provided a bonus for the students of family law by extracting some more evidentiary dilemmas from recent cases involving child sexual abuse.

The death of Daniel Valerio mobilised much feeling in the Victorian Community and appears to have influenced that Government's adoption of mandatory reporting. Phillip Swain looks at mandatory reporting in this context and draws attention to the complexities and the importance of having a child protection system in which the community has confidence. Chris Goddard and Max Liddell trace some of the developments in child protection in Victoria and the United Kingdom with particular reference to the role of the media. Its influence in shaping policy and public viewpoints is considered using the Herald Sun campaign and the events flowing from Daniel's death as a case study. In a follow up to her article on placement disruption in the previous issue, Cas O'Neill has provided a brief literature review. As a response, a rejoinder, to Lesley Cooper's article in the last issue on Victoria's skills enhancement program, standards for competent practice in the health and community services industry gets another airing by Bob Burgell.

It is still the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples and another opportunity has emerged to enhance cultural understanding through the Koorie Heritage Trust Newsletter which the Trust will publish quarterly. Its first edition has been included in this issue.

There are some book reviews and Chris Goddard's column. In this and the next issue, through an interview, Chris enables a mother to speak about the immense difficulty encountered following her son's report of abuse at the hands of a teacher in the education system.

ADOPTION AUSTRALIA

A comparative study of adoption legislation and policy

by **Peter Boss** with the assistance of Sue Edwards

**Introduction by the Hon. Justice Asche
Chief Justice of the Northern Territory**

Published by the National Children's Bureau of Australia Inc. 1992

This book provides the first comprehensive study of adoption legislation and policy in all eight adoption jurisdictions in Australia. The material is organised on a state by state and territory by territory basis under thirteen subject headings, which makes comparison between the jurisdictions easy to follow. In addition, there are chapters which provide an overview of adoption in Australia, past and present; a summary of the legislation; and a discussion on how it might match up with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The work has been prepared with a view to meeting the interests and needs of people who are or have been parties to an adoption; workers in the fields of adoption, social policy, welfare and social work; students in the human resources disciplines; family lawyers; policy shapers and makers. The book can be used as a ready reference guide as well as giving a thorough appraisal of how adoption stands in our times.

The National Children's Bureau has published this book from its own resources in the belief that it is necessary to provide objective coverage of a subject area which is complex to negotiate. It is also timely in view of the obligations laid upon Australia's legislation as a result of the recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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