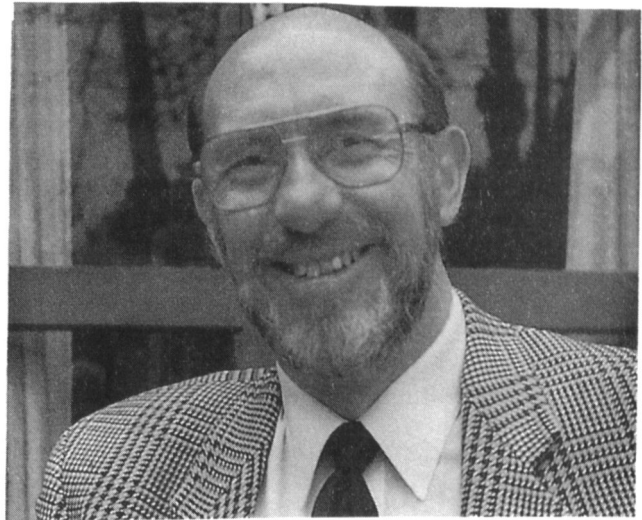


# Editorial



**Lloyd Owen**

1998 is well under way. From where I sit there seems to be a remarkable array of activity likely to have a bearing on the child and family welfare field. At the same time as State and Federal governments appear to be retreating from service provision and turning to purchasing or commissioning models for meeting the needs of more narrowly targeted groups, there seems to be a renewed interest in research of various kinds. Many organisations and individuals in the field are spending a great deal of their time writing tenders for service provision, for outsourced functions such as training and for research and evaluation activity. Considerable interest is growing in the development of predictive models and outcome measures. Both are devices to inform better targeted intervention and prevention and early intervention programs.

There appears to be a renewed interest in service integration or flexible funding to support the purchase of the necessary mix of services for a particular child or family in response to risk factors and problem behaviours from the range of locally available services. One quite interesting article which emerged from some exploration on the Internet summarises a report for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services which brings many of these elements together in planning services for 10-15 year old young people (Burt, Resnick & Matheson 1992). It argues for comprehensiveness of service as well as service integration, and draws on an interesting conceptual framework around the meaning of risk. This has four components: risk antecedents, risk markers, problem behaviours and risk outcomes. The paper defines and exemplifies these components this way. Risk antecedents are negatively impacting environmental forces which increase the vulnerability of the developing individual to future problems in family, school or community. Poverty and some factors in neighbourhood and family environment are examples. Risk markers are visible indicators of behaviour in public records. Poor school performance and involvement with child protection services, including out of home placement, are consistent markers for the range of the problem behaviours of adolescence. Problem behaviours are defined as activities which have the potential to hurt the youth, the community or both. Some listed as having been consistently identified in the literature as potentially leading to more serious consequences are early initiation and practice of sexual behaviour, truancy or absence from school, running

away from home or placement, early use of drugs including tobacco and alcohol, and associating with delinquent peers. Risk outcomes are injurious conditions which impair future development to responsible self sufficient adulthood. Primary concerns include early pregnancy/parenthood, homelessness, involvement in prostitution, alcoholism and or drug abuse, delinquency and criminal behaviour, dropping out of school, sexually transmitted diseases, physical and sexual abuse, and other morbidity and mortality conditions such as hepatitis, tuberculosis, pneumonia, accidents, suicide and homicide.

The paper makes the point that precision in prediction is elusive. The western world in general has just come through a fairly long era in which prediction and over-intervention have been eschewed, with legislation and policy fairly confused about how prescriptive to be, and the discourse contains a struggle over the boundaries of 'significant harm' and 'thresholds for intervention'. The key to these issues however would seem to be the way in which services are configured, their level of availability and accessibility and the degree of stigma and risk they carry themselves through their locus in the system and the way in which they are described and delivered. As useful work accumulates in Australia, in the attempt to come to grips with risk factors and protective factors and how best to address the wellbeing of children and their families, some bold attempts to address policy and process are appearing. One such recent release is the Victorian Youth and Family Services Redevelopment Strategic Directions Document (VDHS 1997). Among the many things it sets out to do is to achieve a balanced, targeted and linked service system with clear access points, clear and robust service interventions and appropriate area and community-based service delivery. It conceives of services in terms of generalist services (akin to earlier notions of primary services or mainstream); targeted self-managed services; and targeted case managed services. Self management implies voluntary access for those eligible and these services may include outreach, while targeted case managed services will include statutory supervision and some forms of support to families and youth with complex or severe difficulties. It is difficult to find fault with these ideas, any rub is more likely to come from the resources available for implementation and some of the less certain consequences of the more competitive environment. Potentially it heralds some exciting times albeit in a fairly

mean economic environment, among pressing social problems such as unemployment, homelessness, addictions and substantial socio-economic inequality.

Contributors to this issue also take us into interesting domains. Paul Drielsma describes an early intervention home visiting initiative developing as a three year pilot on the central coast of New South Wales. Targeted to first time parents, the underlying principles are explained with its operational intent. In the nineties we have been well into a trend toward bigness in units such as schools, purportedly to achieve efficiency, greater choice in activity options and the realisation of property assets to reduce government debt. John Evan's article on schools and children's play raises some serious questions about the costs and benefits, in effectiveness and amenity terms, of the rush to bigger. In 'Family support: A vital link in the chain', Louise Mulrone draws on work undertaken by the Family Support Services Association of New South Wales which seeks to describe the nature and position of Family Support Services as they have evolved there. This material is likely to be useful for planners in other States and Territories and for students trying to come to grips with the field. Peter Mertin from the South Australian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service provides a brief report based on a two year study of children entering respite care and some reflection on the use of Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder as a diagnostic category and some limitations related to it. He examines the category and warns of the risk of overlooking other elements which should be addressed such as developmental stage, comorbidity, family stress and family dysfunction. Overuse of the category and over-reliance on medication are raised as contemporary concerns.

Young lesbian 'wimmin' speak up in Lyn Burnett's article from Queensland, providing personal perspectives and a challenge to the marginalising influences they experience. There is room for much more open discussion in these areas which inherently touch deep feeling in society. Opportunity to speak and be heard may pave the way for a greater appreciation and less trauma for those who follow on paths which lead in this direction. Chris Goddard touches raw nerves in reporting his examination and reflection on abuse uncovered in the care system in North Wales. The graphic accounts of survivors of systematic abuse over a long period powerfully reinforces the need to ensure that people in relatively powerless positions must be allowed to speak and to be heard. Not all survived the silence or the deafness. Climates must be maintained in care systems which enable children, young people and others with concerns to safely speak.

Lloyd Owen

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