Editorial

<div align="right">Jennifer Lehmann</div>

The month of August saw international visitors from the UK, Italy and USA delivering seminars, research colloquia and Round Table discussions in Victoria, as well as in other states and New Zealand. Marian Brandon, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of East Anglia, Tiziano Vecchiato and Cinzia Canali of the Zancan Foundation in Padua, Italy, and Robin Spath, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Connecticut, were presenting the outcomes of their studies which have no doubt been of considerable interest to practitioners in our sector and academics alike. In particular, the work of Marian Brandon from the UK and Robin Spath from the University of Connecticut had direct relevance to areas of concern in Australia—those being child abuse and achieving permanent care arrangements for children.

Marian Brandon's study of 161 cases of child death or serious injury based in England included both quantitative and qualitative elements; and may be the largest study of this nature so far undertaken. A number of interesting issues were raised by the quantitative data alone. For instance, it showed that 47% of the cases investigated were of children under one year of age and 16% of deaths or serious injuries were due to shaking of the child. Only 5% of the cases involved children with a known disability, this being an issue that often arises, though with many of the children being so young this number may have inherent inaccuracy. In terms of characteristics of parents, the issues of domestic violence, substance abuse and mental ill-health were common, being 66%, 54% and 55% respectively. Other issues— those of residential mobility (30%) and being poor (36%) — no doubt echo the situation as we find it here in Australia.

The picture painted is, perhaps, a familiar one to those in child protection and related services. However, it was the commentary by Marian that accompanied the research data that was of particular interest. She suggested that while governments, policy makers and human service workers all work to prevent death and serious injuries of children, this is probably not possible to achieve. This opinion was based on the finding that most of the children were not receiving specialist services at the time of their death or injury, even though the majority of children had been in contact with services at some point. This raises the issue of risk versus prediction and Marian pointed out that workers cannot predict outcomes for children and their families; they can only make decisions based on what knowledge is available to them and the risks that are present at the time. However, having said that, Marian also suggested that we need to be careful not to fall into the 'start again' syndrome that can eventuate when workers are new to their role, or new to a case, or when a family hasn't been seen for some time.

Finally, Marian stressed that the study raised the need to consider accumulative risk and the complex interactions of differing risk factors. Poor cooperation with workers by families, fragmented responses by staff of different agencies, differences in perspective or in intervention styles, worker 'paralysis' due to anxiety, or too great a tolerance of lack of

progress towards change, were all issues that were raised in this research.

Robin Spath, Graduate School of Social Work, University of Connecticut, reported on the evaluation of a particular family reunification program— Casey Family Services Model Family Reunification Program. This was very generously funded by philanthropy at a level not usually experienced in the delivery of human services. However, given the cost of providing ongoing care for children, the results were interesting, especially as the study used a control group for comparative purposes. While the permanency outcomes for the children were very similar, the time it took to achieve a permanency outcome differed markedly between the sample and the comparison groups. It took an average of 44.2 weeks to achieve a permanent arrangement for those in the program compared to 66 weeks for the comparison group. In addition, those children whose parents were involved in the Program experienced significantly fewer placements/moves than did the children in the comparison group.

Finally, while the study conducted by Tiziano Vecchiato and Cinzia Canali of the Zancan Foundation in Padua, Italy, was not immediately applicable to the Australian context, it was interesting to hear about such a large scale effort to assess the equity in funding of human services across Italy. This social policy and services research showed that there were marked discrepancies in the funding available to families and children both between regions and between areas within regions. This work has resulted in a commitment by the Italian government to redress the inequitable distribution of funding in the coming years. The demographic data provided was also of interest with 4.3 marriages per 1000 inhabitants, 1.3 children per woman, a population of 22% migrants, 36.5% of families living with older [≥ 65 years] relatives and 13% of the population living in poverty. It is evident that enhancing service equity under these circumstances will be essential.

Following the seminar I attended to hear about the studies conducted overseas, I was drawn to pondering the issues of risk in our sector. There is nothing new about risk, of course, and some more hardy individuals than I would consider it the spice of life. But for the children, young people and families experiencing disadvantage at various points in their lives, exposure *to* risk, along with over-concern *about* risk, may serve to exacerbate their difficulties in reaching outcomes that are both favourable and sustainable.

Exposure to risk can be subtle and, while we have become familiar with the more obvious risks of abuse, multiple placements, self-harm and the like, we are not always adept at recognising and dealing with the less obvious manifestations of risk. Recently, in the process of studying partnerships, some of the 'hidden' risks have emerged in the course of conducting interviews. It began when a participant talked of the risk to a child in foster care of 'missing out' because of standards and regulatory issues. In the example given, the fostered child became easily identifiable in a small community setting because the carers were required to fence

their property to meet safety standards. No one else in this hamlet spent money on fences, the local children played freely about the neighbourhood and were well-known and 'kept an eye on' by all.

Life and living in our uncertain and stressful society is, of course, risky in itself — feedback is often confusing and ambiguous so that we are unsure of our decisions and the impacts of our actions. However, I wonder, as we put in place various new approaches to coping with child abuse and neglect, whether our concerns about liability are overriding aspects of the core purpose of intervening in families. The rights of children and young people are diminished in authoritarian, rule-based, regulated systems whether they are the institutions of past eras or the less visible institutions of the present. Both 'versions' value conformity, while seeking to care and protect, but largely on their own terms (albeit this being a reflection of society's perspectives); and both are poor at innovation or allowing creative, and thus different and risky, solutions to be implemented.

The 'emergency measures' instituted by the Federal Government to deal with allegations of abuse of children and associated disadvantage within Aboriginal communities — a topic of considerable debate at present — demonstrate the inability to tolerate risk whilst in-depth consultations and negotiations with those most intimately involved take place. Those known to belong to some of the risk-aversive groups in society have been called in to control and contain behaviour of a few members of Indigenous communities. As individuals, members of police forces and the Army will no doubt do their best to take a mature and balanced approach to the task. However, the imposition of regulation is unlikely to be experienced as encouragement to seek solutions; most of which require time, trust and long-term investment to be sustainable.

Our first paper is a review of a recently released Report titled *Educational outcomes of children on guardianship or custody orders: A pilot study*, published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. In her review Michelle Townsend acknowledges this study as one of the first comprehensive Australian assessments of educational performance for children on guardianship or custody orders. The study examines how children on guardianship/custody orders are performing to assess whether children have achieved the minimum standards in reading and numeracy for years 3, 5 and 7. The finding that children in care are significantly educationally disadvantaged suggests there is still much to be done to turn this situation around. In particular, we need to recognise the cumulative impacts of educational deficit on these children's lives.

Moving to social policy and the issue of domestic violence in the lives of children, Suellen Murray and Anastasia Powell note there is now clear recognition that children are affected by exposure to domestic violence. However, in their article, Murray and Powell suggest that 'the "discovery" of the

impact of domestic violence on children and the development of public policy responses have not been straightforward processes of problem identification and solution'. Their paper identifies a number of competing discourses that underlie various policy approaches and considers the implications of these for current policy and practice.

The two papers that follow address issues of fathering. The first, by Joe Fleming, provides a brief overview of the literature concerning the issue of father absence in child welfare, addressing theories of fatherhood which are relevant to current key practice issues that may be faced when delivering services to families. The second, by Andrew King and Ross Fletcher, explores how separated fathers, who may have limited or no contact with their children, can be understood from a non-deficit perspective. King and Fletcher use the concept of generative fathering, a framework which can be used as a model to assist separated fathers to rebuild connections with their children.

The final two papers in this edition take up very different issues, but are nevertheless topics often in the minds of adults, given our complex, uncertain and often violent world. First is a research report by Linda Gilmore and Marilyn Campbell who acknowledge that Australian children have been exposed to a range of frightening images of war and terrorism in the media. They studied the fears of children aged 6 to 12 years, and their findings indicate that the type and intensity of children's fears were similar to previous studies conducted over the past two decades, with being hit by a car, bombs and being unable to breathe producing the most fear. However, in considering the spontaneous responses of children, it appears the greatest fears were of animals, the dark and being lost. This study will be of particular interest to those concerned about the amount of coverage in the media of terrorism and violence and its impacts on children. Concluding this edition, Jenny O'Neill reports on working with a group of young men in Gippsland who, with support, took the initiative in studying what young men need in terms of health education. It is the voices of the young men themselves which come through in this article; a reminder that so often the perspective of clients is often secondary to those of academics and professional practitioners.

In this edition we have celebrated the commitment of several practitioners who have gone the extra mile to commit their ideas and experiences to article-format in order to share it with the sector. It is especially difficult for practitioners to find the time to document their work in this style as it is not one that is regularly used in day-to-day work. In addition, the demands of practice tend to distance one from writing in the academic style required by journals, so we are especially appreciative of their patience with our editing processes. We hope that our inclusion of practice-related work will encourage more people involved in service delivery to submit papers. And we continue to welcome Letters to the Editor on matters concerning the sector, its policies and practices.

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