



# Editorial



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Public attention is sometimes drawn (often in a tragically dramatic way) to the problem of child abuse in the community, and the response is more often than not horror and outrage. The presentation of child abuse in the media is usually focussed on child abuse in the family. Many welfare programmes, preventative and remedial, also have individual families as their focus. Yet child abuse inflicted within the family is only one aspect of known child abuse. It could be well to ask why the other aspects are ignored.

At the 1981 2nd Australasian Conference on Child Abuse, Jan Carter in a paper titled "Systems, and Institutional Abuse" quoted David Gil's categorization of the presence of child abuse. Gil sees the presence of child abuse occurring at different levels in the community and each level acting upon the other. The presence of child abuse at the level of the family is the area which receives most attention (albeit intermittently) by both welfare professionals and the public. The presence of child abuse at the institutional level identified by Gil, is perhaps even more sinister, and yet this area receives little attention. This abuse can occur through action through an officer of an institution abusing his/her power or being negligent or inadequate in the performance of their job functions. However, abuse can also occur through deliberate policies of an institution itself. These policies may, for example, exclude children needing an institution's help or facilitate the breakdown of families by prematurely removing the child from the family.

The abuse of children can also occur in the broader systems in the community. Unfortunately, it is not difficult when examining systems within our community to detect this abuse. It can sometimes be seen to occur when action is being taken supposedly to protect the child. A child being removed from his/her family and having to live for a period of time in a reception centre where there is inadequate attention to his/her needs is an example of this.

On the broader systems level it can be seen that our economic system can directly or indirectly cause abuse to children. The direct abuse occurs when a large proportion of school leavers are prevented from becoming productive members of the society through lack of work opportunities. Indirectly, the inadequate benefits and pensions paid to parents unable to work inflicts abuse on children. Studies have shown that the children from lower socio-economic groups have a greater likelihood of being taken into State care, the cause of family breakdown considered to be in at least some part, financial pressures.

In *Australian Society* (Vol. 1, No. 4), John Tomlinson wrote compellingly of an aboriginal child who died at 8 months of age due to lack of adequate nutrition and financial and community supports to the family. As reported in the paper by John Edwards, Graeme Gregory and Denis Oakley published in this issue, aboriginal children have a higher likelihood of being admitted to care than do white children. The proportion of aboriginal children in care in their survey represented approximately 1 in 106 of all aboriginal children. Could this level of family breakdown have its origins in institutional abuse?

In their paper on *Australian Children in Substitute Care*, which is a survey of children in care, Edwards, Oakley and Gregory identify the cause of admission to care and put this into categories. Approximately 45% of the children in care were admitted due to outside factors impinging on the family (break up of family 16.3%, child at risk 15.3%, parents can't cope 14.3%). Whether or not these children were directly abused by their parents, they had all experienced the break down of protection of a society that should be protecting them.

In this issue we also address, through Graham Withers' paper, the complex question of costing in children's institutions. The necessary functions for quality of care are often difficult to isolate, much less put a monetary value upon. Informal counselling of a child just returned from an upsetting family visit; being readily available to the child's parents; training families, are only some of the activities which have to be included in an appropriate costing system. In the first of two papers, Graham Withers suggests an accounting model which child welfare agencies, could use as their costing model. Many agencies in Victoria will be aware that the Victorian Children's Welfare Association has been working on this project for some time, and have been consulting with a number of agencies.

In other papers, Kathryn Richardson reports on research into foster care and Anne Giljohann looks at the effects of intervention programmes for children who have suffered severe burns.

*Margarita Frederico*