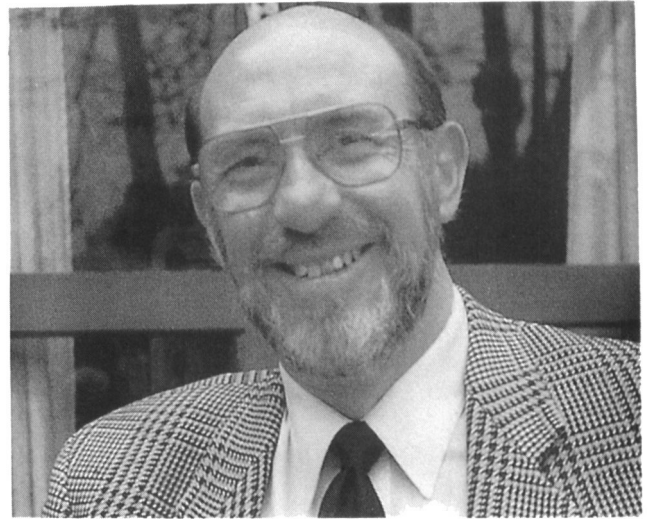# Editorial

Lloyd Owen

As this issue goes to press, we are savouring the information sharing and networking from World Forum 2000, the International Forum for Child Welfare annual conference held in Sydney in August. Quite a few of the papers from the conference can now be accessed on the website (www. acwa.asn.au/wf2000). Keynotes ranged across an array of startling global issues, indigenous issues, youth issues and culminated with powerful reminders of the significance of relationships and citizenship in local and global communities and the networks to which we belong in between. Closing sessions included some powerful reminders from Carol Peltola, an outstanding contributor to the public sector in Queensland and now in New South Wales, supported by a panel of young people, and Prashanth Shanmugam, a member of the National Youth Roundtable 2000. Messages were clear – when we fail to recognise the significance of human connectedness to reliable adults and supportive communities, when we fail to listen, when we fail to guide with positive role models, when we fail to recognise talent, when we fail to appreciate diversity, when we fail to provide outlets for energy and altruism, the obstacles mount on life's pathway. Sometimes to the point of being insurmountable for the individual. Sometimes to the point of creating tragedy in the lives of others.

We have been captured also in recent weeks by the Olympic torch relay and by the time you read this, the Games themselves will be part of our lives. Hopefully we will find in them a positive sense of world community and the kind of spirit which inspires and spurs us to address the many ills which need to be energetically addressed in future days and years. Regrettably, as the spotlight goes on to this great country, I find a mounting sense of shame over some policies and practices which appear to fly in the face of the Australian commitment to a 'fair go'. At the State and Territory level, child protection and juvenile justice policies still seem to swing excessively between 'too little too late' and 'too much too soon'. That is not to say that many good things are not happening, it is to say that sustained instances of a sound whole of government approach in sufficient partnership with business and not-for-profit sectors seem to be relatively rare.

There is an apparent commitment to prevention and early intervention, but a serious lack of vision about how to build local communities which are sustainable, safe, inclusive, supportive and stimulating places to embrace as home. Hopefully some of the intended refocus on the 'social' beside the 'economic' will help a vision to grow. In a number of respects the approach to dealing with illegal immigrants reflects a misunderstanding of human nature and a misplaced faith in punitive philosophies. I find it abhorrent that my country takes a narrow parochial stance on international instruments and human rights processes, instead of keeping our shoulder to the wheel of the UN global human rights wagon on its tortuous quest for a better world. The need remains acute for prompt, principled and accountable global responses to human rights abuses, economic exploitation and environmental irresponsibility.

Many of these issues touch on questions about how to achieve appropriate forms of social support without sapping initiative and endeavour; how to exercise necessary social control without creating an oppressive, rule-bound society with diminished incentive to exercise personal responsibility. Occasionally one comes across a work which advances one's thinking on such issues. For me this happened recently on reading a Canadian study of youth crime and homelessness by John Hagan and Bill McCarthy. Built on in-depth interviews with over four hundred young people living on the streets of Vancouver and Toronto, the study investigates background factors and street life events. It also examines personal factors, family and social network factors and community characteristics among the population and across the two sites. Of interest are differing approaches in the two cities to 'welfare' and 'law and order' responses to homelessness. The theoretical gain is the way the researchers demonstrate the value of social capital theory to link in an overarching and bridging way an array of earlier theoretical perspectives of crime (social strain theory, control theory and differential association). They provide useful evidence of social capital accumulation and diminution in individual and family circumstances as well as in the community context. The downward spiralling trajectories for young people whose access to social advantage is cumulatively blocked is all too evident (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997).

> Social capital originates in socially structured relations between individuals in families and in aggregations of individuals such as neighbourhoods, churches, schools and so on. These relations

facilitate social action by generating a knowledge and sense of obligations, expectations, trustworthiness, information channels, norms and sanctions (Hagan & McCarthy, 1997:229).

Again one finds evidence of the significance of interpersonal relationships on a day-to-day basis and throughout the life course. The continuity and quality of those relationships are of great concern to the children and young people who become involved with services providing family support and out-of-home care. The key role of direct care workers is a frequently recurring theme in studies which have tapped the views of young people themselves though these workers are not always included in planning processes. Relationships with family and social workers are often troubled territory but nonetheless of great significance to young people themselves. Some notable sources of input from young people which have recently crossed my desk include the Hagan and McCarthy study mentioned above. It is worth observing that this stands well beside a study in Calgary by Kufeldt and Burrows (1994) in which young people pointed to the importance of empathy, genuineness, acceptance, attentiveness, respect, commitment and trustworthiness as worker characteristics. *The Guide to Recruiting and Selecting Residential Workers*, published by Kildonan Child and Family Services, draws on research conducted by Meredith Kiraly which sought to involve young people in selection processes. This identified important characteristics of good workers. Ongoing research of this type is also informing the *Choose with Care* Program being promoted by ECPAT. Most recently we became acquainted with a NSW study based on inputs from children and young people in foster care (Community Services Commission 2000). This will be reviewed for a future issue of *Children Australia*. CREATE has also just completed a consultation with 78 young care leavers in Victoria (Griffin 2000). The vision developed by these young people for leaving care is worth sharing now.

> Our vision is: to participate in decision-making about our own lives; to be trusted and treated like an adult; to be well informed; to have access to choices; to be happy and feel positive; to have self confidence and believe in own personal power; to be able see dreams through; to be motivated; to have emotional stability and the ability to deal with a crisis; to be treated like a person and seen as 'normal'; to be healthy; to feel cared about, respected and accepted; to have open communication with people in my life; to have freedom for and be supported and encouraged to become independent; to have the skills and abilities to be able to access education and employment and to 'be prepared' to leave care; to have access to ongoing support when needed; to have a steady relationship with family members; to have friends and happy relationships with other people; to have friendships with other people in similar situations; to feel connected to a community; to have flexibility in support from services that can cater for individual needs; to have stability and live in a secure environment; to be able to learn from experience (Griffin, 2000:25).

Readers will be aware that CREATE is the new name for the national organisation formerly known as AAYPIC, the Australian Association of Young people in Care. The organisation continues to go from strength to strength. We

have also been informed of the birth of CLAN (Care Leavers of Australia Network), a new organisation to cater for the needs of adults who have been in care in the past. CLAN is organising a public meeting in Sydney on 21 October. They are keen to involve all who have experience of residential and home based care with a view to developing a mutual support network, identifying outstanding needs and working constructively for better outcomes. Contact details for both of these organisations are included below.

Our contributors to this issue have provided an interesting range of articles. Jim Barber, Paul Delfabbro and Lesley Cooper from South Australia report on part of the first phase of a three year longitudinal study into the outcomes of alternative care. Given concerns frequently reported about opportunities and outcomes for indigenous children in their involvement with the welfare system, this part of the study explores comparatively for rural and metropolitan locations, the situation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the cohort of 198 South Australian children referred for a new out-of-home care placement in the 12 months to April 1999. While confirming the general overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the care system, it signals change in the likelihood of long term involvement. It points to greater reliance on the care system for metropolitan Aboriginal children and rural non-Aboriginal children. Some reunification questions are posed and it will be good to hear of future progress in this study.

Philip Mendes and Chris Goddard draw on the literature to discuss leaving care programs in Australia and overseas. A topic of concern in most Australian jurisdictions, leaving care is the subject of much ongoing work. The realisation that the risk of diminished life chances is high for many young care leavers has contributed to soul searching in policy and legislation, a variety of program approaches and an unprecedented incentive to listen to the young people involved and to look more closely at outcomes. In general, Australian systems still seem to be caught between great reluctance to continue formal involvement in the lives of children and families beyond the minimum required to ensure safety and avoid scandal and the recognition that overcoming the disadvantages of a disrupted childhood may warrant substantial intervention or at least extended support to continue education or to access employment.

Carol Kayrooz and Cathy Blunt from ACT report on a parent education program designed for culturally and linguistically diverse immigrant groups. 'Bending Like a River' refers to the challenges parents face as their children extend their cultural identities and the specific need to understand cultural, systemic and legal differences in school and child protection systems. Delivery to three groups, of Croatian, Chinese and Samoan background, was independently evaluated indicating positive outcomes and potential for extension to other cultural groups.

Andrew King from Burnside in NSW reports on the agency's experience in developing father valuing programs in support of children and families in disadvantaged communities. By seeking to develop a non deficit approach to fathering the program challenges some widely held assumptions which work against constructively enlisting

fathers in contemporary parenting roles. With better outcomes for children as a goal, the paper draws on some of the literature and a number of case illustrations to show what might be done to facilitate change.

Richard Hil from Queensland has provided a critical discussion challenging the widely held use of risk assessment (prediction and management) and the assumption that it enables the identification of the cause of crime, thereby enabling preventive steps to be taken. He draws a parallel with the concept of 'dangerousness', the subject of earlier criminological attempts at prediction which have fallen somewhat into disrepute. The paper bespeaks also a criticism of developmental perspectives and an old tension between psychological and sociological perspectives. The federally sponsored Pathways to Prevention Report, 1999, provides the vehicle for Richard's arguments. By providing a warning that these matters are rarely simple, critiques can be helpful. By identifying assumptions as assumptions we can acknowledge the tentative nature of many of our conclusions. I suspect, though, that one of the better safeguards against dicey assertions is the effort to enable the voices of those involved and affected to be clearly heard. Some evidence of enabling this to happen has been presented in this issue of *Children Australia*.

Book reviews range across fields but a common thread continues the theme of challenging commonly held assumptions.

Chris Goddard has used his regular space to reinforce an example of abuse, repeated and protracted in Court processes, and his experience with newspaper reporting of the event. Again evidence of the distance yet to go to achieve a safe and sensitive civil society where rights are upheld and responsibilities exercised without adding harm to harm.

Lloyd Owen

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Kufeldt, K. & Burrows, B. (Eds) (1994) *Issues Affecting Public Policies and Services for Homeless Youth: Final Report*, Calgary: The Runaway and Homeless Youth Study Committee, The University of Calgary, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

> *The Guide to Recruiting and Selecting Residential Workers* is available from Kildonan Child & Family Services (tel: 03 9419 0222).
>
> Information on the *Choose with Care* program is available from ECPAT (tel: 03 9419 9518)

Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN)

CLAN offers support to adults who have been State Wards, Home Children, foster children, or who have grown up in an orphanage, institution or children's home.

CLAN aims to set up a network of support for adults who have been in care, to raise community awareness of the possible unresolved issues of a childhood spent in care, and to campaign for government assistance to redress these issues. Being raised without your family has lifelong implications which require lifelong support services.

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Cost: Gold coin donation

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