

Editorial

Our first issue in the International Year of the Child focusses on the family, an institution much under attack, and perhaps even more important, much misunderstood. Too often we take parenthood for granted, failing to plan for the consequences for relationships which formerly involved solely meeting the needs of adults. The large number of children in public care throughout Australia is one symptom of this casual approach to what is a central activity in any society — the formation of family type units. Even more disturbing than the numbers involved is our lack of understanding (and perhaps concern) about why they come into care, how long they stay and what happens to them during their care. It goes without saying that little follow up takes place after they have left. From time to time we hear of children getting “lost” in the system. This ought not to surprise us when we examine the system — a system that is largely uncoordinated and divided between state and voluntary bodies; a system often based on antiquated buildings, inadequate staffing ratios and outmoded notions of child care. Only two years ago researchers in one state found institutions which separated boys and girls; where brothers were punished for playing “in the girls’ area” — with their own sisters! What other practices are there shaping the lives of children who have been removed from the care of their parents, for their own safety and good? Some of the answers to these questions may emerge from a research project involving a national survey of volun-

tary children’s homes to be carried out by The Children’s Bureau of Australia. For the first time we should have a body of nationally representative data about the private sector of child welfare which is presently scattered through at best sketchy annual reports and the occasional story in the press. We should have a picture of the range of child care facilities and hopefully an indication of philosophies and trends in care. With this data to hand we can evaluate an important part of our child care system to see for example whether it operates at a level above the mere motive of rescue, without any plan for the future. We can also perhaps begin to differentiate between those who need institutional forms of care and those for whom some other substitute is more appropriate. Lambert and Rowe in their research study “Children Who Wait” (1973) found almost 6,000 children in children’s homes for whom foster care or adoption were judged to be more appropriate forms of care. Recent discussions about the development of flexible foster care programmes should give us all encouragement that the institutional model is yielding. A larger question will also need to be answered — do we have the policy makers, the workers and the resources to keep children in the community where they belong? The International Year of the Child is a most opportune time to seek answers to that question.

*Cliff Picton,
Editor.*