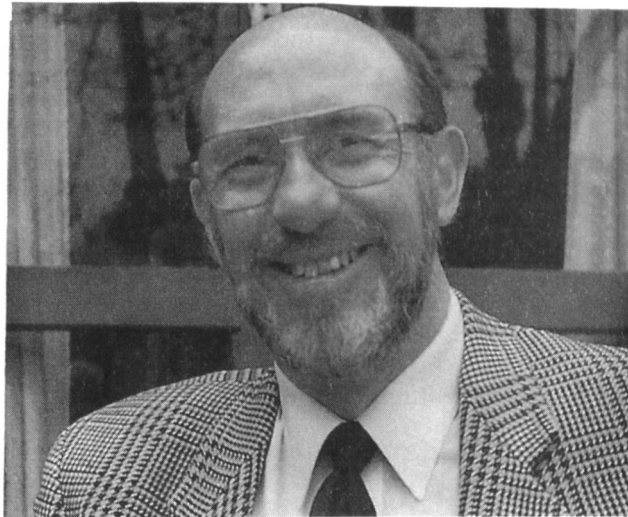


Editorial



Lloyd Owen

In this issue, a special focus has been given to children embroiled in situations of family violence. We are fortunate in being able to present readers with the edited proceedings of a symposium organised by the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne in May in association with the Kath Dawe Memorial Lecture for 2002. Together they provide a range of insights into the impact on children of family violence and a range of questions, ideas and examples for service providers concerned with family violence and concerned with child protection.

Since the last issue, Australians have had to absorb the horror of events in Bali on 12th October. The news of this event reached me in the course of some travels which took me through Thailand, England, Greece and Ireland where, in addition to meeting with many people concerned about children, their families and a peaceful world, there were frequent reminders of the human propensity for division, misunderstanding and the use of violent means to achieve ends. Such reminders sit paradoxically alongside what appear to be near universal desires for happiness and a safe society for those we love, as well as for ourselves.

There were security conscious airports in most places, frequent references to terrorism and many reminders in the celebrated histories of most of the places visited, of human conflict, ancient and modern. Among the many palaces, castles, walled cities and stories of conquest and defeat, we experienced on Rhodes one of the mediaeval strongholds of the crusading Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. Arriving in 1309, they were defeated there in 1522 by the Ottoman Turks in the later stages of an earlier holy war – a multi national contingent fighting under a sectarian banner. One could not help drawing parallels with events of today, reinforced especially in encounters with palpable military presence, police and various forms of public and private security forces. If one adds our daily news and much of our entertainment, the visitor from another planet could be forgiven for thinking that human cultures are predominantly violent. (I am reminded in saying this of the 1995 book by Judith Bessant, Kerry Carrington and Sandy Cook, *Cultures of Crime and Violence: The Australian Experience*, Melbourne: La Trobe University Press in association with the Victorian Law Foundation.)

The Crusades, a Jihad and a war on terror, all seem to me to make a dangerous case if they seek to legitimise the use of lethal force in circumstances other than defence against clear and present life threatening danger. I personally can find no moral justification sanctioning execution. To do so sets a standard which many with grievances may be disposed to follow. For the same reason I would reject violent forms of punishment. They too set examples and provide unwelcome justifications for violent behaviour, quite apart from many other reasons for pursuing the ideal of a compassionate, humanitarian and democratic society. Coercion will at times be necessary to restrain and contain serious threats but the process and performance of those required to act must be legitimate, ethical and humanely directed to a compassionate and just application of restraint and restoration. As for just processes, we have many at our disposal, from the array of informal conflict resolution strategies, to more formal forms of mediation and, ultimately, the array of formal legal processes which may be called to arbitrate or, in a final form, transparently and fairly weigh the justification for coercive restraint, deterrence, retribution and restitution. I suspect though that we have much to do to convince the leaders of nations to see it this way, just as we have much to do to achieve adequate responses for present perpetrators of community and family violence and to equip our growing children with the means to develop and pursue non violent lifestyles.

We know that some children more than others will need help to extend their repertoires and coping strategies away from impulsive and aggressive behaviour. We know that some families warrant extra help, extra support and sometimes restraint in the socialising opportunities they provide for their developing children. We know that all schools need to actively work to avoid bullying and the kind of school failure which sets young people more firmly on negative careers, and that some schools will need extra help to achieve this. We know that neighbourhoods can be positive and negative forces in children's lives and that, where they and their families are socially excluded, consequences can be serious and long term. We know that for some children, a surfeit of exposure to real violence or abuse, and in some instances violent media borne images, can push them along paths through victimisation to offending.

