

The Second Kath Dawe Memorial Lecture

and

Our children our future ... domestic violence and its consequences

A symposium held at the Royal Children's Hospital, 15 May 2002

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Readers of *Children Australia* will know that in the past thirty years enormous strides have been made both in understanding family violence and in providing a wide range of resources to help support women who find themselves living in situations where they are at risk of being injured or killed through domestic violence.

Today it is difficult to imagine the situation I faced as a young social worker in the 1960s working in a family agency. A young woman who had been severely beaten by her husband sustaining broken teeth and black eyes had virtually no alternative but to return to him. There were no women's refuges, few child care services and no supporting parent benefits. Her only other option would have been to find work and to hand the children to an institution.

The development of women's refuges and the provision of social security payments for lone mothers were necessary prerequisites to enable women to escape from violent family situations. These changes have greatly improved the situation of women. Unfortunately in our existing community services with their emphasis on the needs of adults, the impact of family violence on children's lives has tended to be overlooked.

It is encouraging that at both state and federal levels, governments are coming to recognize the needs of children in violent families, and issues concerning the possible long term harm to these children are now receiving attention.

There are now some excellent government initiatives. In 1999–2000 the Commonwealth Government addressed the impact of domestic and family violence in our community with their initiative 'Partnerships Against Domestic Violence'. They state clearly that children 'deserve to grow and develop in families free from violence or the threat of violence' (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence & Strategic Partners Pty Ltd, 2000). The National Forum 'The Way Forward', held under the auspice of Partnerships Against Domestic Violence in Melbourne in April 2000, brought together practitioners and policy makers from all states of Australia to discuss good practice models.

Victoria's recently initiated State Steering Committee to Reduce Family Violence is a ground breaking partnership between the Department of Justice, the Magistrates Court

and the Children's Court, the Victoria Police, the Department of Human Services and the Office of Women's Policy.

As described in the paper by Ms Gill Callister, Director of Child Protection and Juvenile Justice at Victoria's Department of Human Services, that department is developing a range of approaches to protecting children in these circumstances.

One of the keys to protecting these vulnerable children is raising the awareness of professionals about the impact of violence on infants, children and young people. In a paediatric hospital, while children generally present with medical problems, associated family problems, including intimate partner violence, may be disclosed in the course of interviews. Yet, not infrequently, no action is taken.

The 2002 Kath Dawe Memorial Lecture, supported by a symposium, was designed to highlight these issues for those of us who work in health and welfare with children, to look at some of the growing body of evidence and to consider issues both of prevention and remediation.

The aim of the Kath Dawe Memorial Lecture series is both to commemorate the life of the late Miss Kath Dawe, the first professionally qualified social worker to head the Social Work Department at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, and to provoke debate about current issues facing children or paediatric social work in Australia. The Inaugural Kath Dawe Memorial Lecture at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne in 2000 was an inspiring address by Associate Professor Dorothy Scott of the University of Melbourne.

This year we were very honoured to welcome Assistant Professor Virginia Walther of Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York, to deliver the Kath Dawe Lecture of 2002. Not only did her lecture lay out some of the dilemmas and outline relevant research, but Professor Walther's career exemplifies the interplay of research with clinical practice which we see as essential for the way ahead for social work.

It is valuable to draw parallels with other societies, and where possible to build on other experience. Equally it is important to recognize the excellent work occurring in

Australia. For this reason four local practitioners and researchers presented aspects of their clinical work or research at the symposium. To provide an interactive environment and include as many views as possible in a short space of time, four discussants responded.

These papers and the discussants' responses have been reviewed and edited for publication as both proceedings of this symposium and this special issue of *Children Australia*. The edited presentations which follow are:

- Ms Gill Callister's overview of current Department of Human Services (Vic) directions, mentioned above;
- Ms Deborah Walsh's study of the experience of violence of pregnant women attending a major Melbourne maternity hospital;
- Dr. Brigid Jordan's description of a case in which painstaking psychosocial assessment, and in particular, a detailed assessment of the baby, revealed that its mysterious and serious failure to thrive was the infant's response to intimate partner violence;
- Ms Wendy Bunston's description of the PARKAS program which helps older children recover from living in violent families; and

- Ms Julie Hall's exploration of some of the dilemmas in responding appropriately to such families in the maze of a huge paediatric hospital.

This is not an easy area in which to work. The competing claims of mothers, fathers and children can immobilise the health or welfare professional. It is hoped that these papers, based in sound experience and drawing on current research, make a useful contribution to knowledge in this field.

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REFERENCE

Partnerships Against Domestic Violence & Strategic Partners Pty. Ltd.
(Co-ordinated by Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women)
(2002) *Domestic Violence Prevention: Strategies and Resources for Working with Young People*, April, p.iii.

INFORMATIVE WEBSITES

The following websites provide information on topics relating to child abuse and family violence:

- **Partnerships Against Domestic Violence :**
www.padv.dpmc.gov.au
A Commonwealth Government initiative, working with the States and Territories and the community to prevent domestic violence. The PADV Secretariat is located in the Office of the Status of Women
- **Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse :**
www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au
A comprehensive national resource on issues of domestic and family violence, providing a central point for the collection and dissemination of Australian domestic and family violence policy, practice and research (including links to Australian state and federal government initiatives, community organisations, inter-agency initiatives, indigenous sites, prevention sites, as well as more broadly related sites and international sites).
- **National Child Protection Clearinghouse:**
www.aifs.org.au/nch
- **Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (Vic) :**
www.dvirc.org.au
- **DVlink (NSW) :**
www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au
- **WESNET The Women's Services Network**
www.wesnet.org.au