

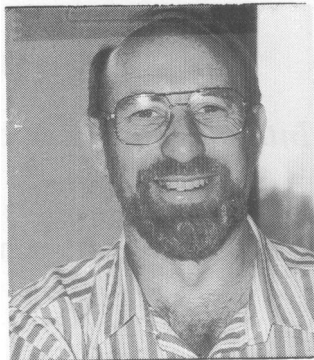
Editorial

As we watched the agony of Rwanda unfold in this year of the family, thoughts turn to the issue of power and its use and abuse. Yet again we saw the threat of violence and death let loose in the life space of a vast number of people, vulnerable people. As vulnerable as we all are, unarmed and ignorant of the intentions of a potential aggressor. Someone bent on our destruction and sufficiently armed to achieve it, and in attitude uninhibited by any allegiance to our welfare or any moral constraint on such destructive behaviour. What incredible rationalisation invades the minds of ordinary men and women to permit such outcomes? The perpetrators in such conflicts, in the vast majority of cases, are ordinary people, the victims also are ordinary men, women and children. This year's International Conference on Victimology in Adelaide in August, has already contributed some very useful perspectives on these and related issues.

Sometimes the drive or the trigger, it seems, is a deep sense of injustice, frustration or betrayal easily fanned into hatred by influential others. Sometimes it may be greed, ambition or jealousy leading to the coveting of others possessions, or sour grapes seeking to spoil the wealth or position of others. Sometimes it is the sheer competition to succeed or survive that one encounters in poverty stricken pockets of the developing world, or the social jungles of the developed world. On occasions allegiance to kith, kin or culture becomes exclusionary toward those who are not of our kind. Where they threaten to compete, they become a negative reference group. Sometimes the victim may be in the path of another objective or simply caught in cross fire. With much modern weaponry, little physical proximity between perpetrator and victim is required for great harm to be done. We must support the International Red Cross in its efforts, in 1995, with the review of the International Convention on Inhumane Weapons, and contribute in any way we can to reducing the production and trade of weapons. The immediate agenda includes seeking a ban on devices like mines and preventing the addition of proposed laser weaponry to the array of permitted conventional weapons.

Much of the effort of the ordinary person is directed to being in control of ourselves and our circumstances, avoiding embarrassment, humiliation, and feeling small. The new recruit to a cause often feels larger, especially as part of a group and in a uniform, and stronger with a weapon in hand. Such feelings apply similarly, I guess, to the camouflage jacket, the police uniform, the suit and tie of the executive and the 'in gear' of the local gang. Sometimes the motivation emanates from fear, fear of things we don't understand, fear of real or imagined threats, perhaps the fear which justifies attack as a form of defence. Sometimes we regard it as a justifiable response to oppression or exploitation.

Society has developed many mechanisms to manage the exercise of power and to manage the potential for conflict. Most of them are not easy to implement. Many of them are unaffordable or out of the reach of poor people, many of them are negated or swept aside by other more powerful interests. The advantage goes to those with bigger artillery, more money, more information,



greater strength and agility, smarter strategies, more mobility or the ability to buy, enlist or mobilise support. Occasionally being on moral high ground helps, certainly having others believe your propaganda does. Of course the unleashing of aggressive force carries the risk of defeat or pyrrhic victory, and almost inevitably includes civilian casualties. Often being in control of things others need is an advantage, providing one has a enough power to bargain or a mutual interest in exchange, and the other is not disposed to take it by stealth or force. A plethora of rules exist to regulate even 'deregulated' exchange. Democracy itself is a mechanism for those enfranchised; courts,

tribunals and systems of arbitration also, for those who can afford them or gain a right to access. Mediation too, has emerged as a means in many areas, but not infrequently we rely on the morals, mercy and good will of the powerful. In all of these, for a positive outcome, we are dependant on someone avoiding disinterest and brutality and exercising responsibility, benevolence, a fair go and justice. Much depends on the attitudes and wisdom of ordinary people, especially those who have, at the time, the whip hand.

I was fortunate recently to hear an address, at the Social Worker's World Conference in Sri Lanka, by Professor John Galtung. His main argument about conflict concerned the simplistic views we have of human conflict and our tendency to dichotomise issues, search for a guilty party and behave in ways which escalate the conflict. He talked of the need to use qualities in people to transform conflict, and covered ten interesting points involving different ways of perceiving and/or behaving when conflict occurs. With some risk of violating the richness of his ideas in this summary, they are:

- real life conflicts are quite complex with many parties and issues;
- conflict transformation (eg, toward non-violent strategies) is a more hopeful goal than seeing conflicts as having a single beginning and a resolution;
- be careful with guilt attribution, Karma and collectivity are likely to be more productive;
- beware of underlying, unstated, undiscussed assumptions;
- be careful with the metaphor for forgiveness, actual forgiveness requires a systematic effort to understand and an inner and outer dialogue to clarify the causes of what happened;
- third parties may be necessary but they must be honest about their goals and they are not to take conflict away;
- there is a need to address the asymmetry of power which may mean support for the underdog;
- advise might be softly indicated;
- diagnosis, prognosis and therapy should only be used in a circular fashion (not linear) and therapy involves dealing with the past (that may be a long and painful process);
- recognise the value of inner dialogue (meditation) to mobilise your own inclinations;
- for deep conflicts, single shot solutions at the top neglect the fact that people will take the matter into their own hands. Consider the constructive solutions which arise from the people.

Wherever children are being educated and socialised, their experience should be one in which the adults they see affirm the value of each person, model responsibility and concern toward others, and demonstrate the exercise of power with justice and without aggression. This means that the business of markets and the business of government need to lift their game. The impact of business practice and the impact of government policies both fall short in the challenge to achieve safe, nurturing and developmentally sound environments for children at home and abroad. One suspects that, at present, each may be looking to the other to make the larger contribution, that business in Australia as a rule has never owned the task of ensuring the welfare of children in their families as a principal concern, while government having advanced toward the welfare state retreats in the hope that most families in the free market environment will manage the job. Of course it is not unreasonable to expect that the family will continue as the principal socialiser and provider of social, psychological and economic support for children. The question is whether business and government help or hinder them in that role, and whether the families involved are engaged in private or public tasks. It is also a question of families rising to the challenges as they have done in the past, but to a different world which uses, in the main, the language of commerce and the market place. Collectively we act legitimately as both constituents and consumers, positions not devoid of influence and power.

In my view, families act as agents of society in bearing and socialising children. The task entails major responsibility and has great social and economic consequences. Yet the economic value of the task is rarely fully addressed and most of our organisational arrangements and some of our cultural inclinations seem designed to make it more rather than less difficult. In no way is it intended to suggest that intentions are not good, the issues are ones of priority, beliefs about how these ends might be achieved and how far business and government responsibility extends. To use the language of the nineties, clear benchmarks are needed representing best policy and practice, but in social as well as economic terms, not to mention the fundamental questions about sustaining a life supporting physical environment. Conflict and poverty-driven migration, and fields laced with land mines, are not indicators of healthy child rearing environments.

Each of the articles in this issue draws attention to some of the gaps in our sustaining and sustainable community. The team from the Hunter, Denise Hogarth, Judy Geggie and Gus Eddy draw attention to the impact of economic labour market and housing policies which leave many families taking the affordable option of caravan park dwelling. The romance in the notion readily gives way to risks of reduced access to services, isolation, sometimes rejection and sometimes unwelcome exposure to very trying circumstances for parents and children. Policy and practice responses are clearly necessary and some direction is shown by this team.

Annette Holland delves into the private sphere and fathers' involvement in child rearing, discovering interest and ideals among fathers toward greater participation in parenting. Also discovered are an interesting array of barriers spread across institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal realms.

Rosemary Cant and Margaret Hand use some historical analysis to tackle the resurgence of thorniness in the question of how far the community should go in its support of families who have members with disabilities, dallying as they go with somewhat controversial notions about the form of care. In raising the issue of congregate care, they draw attention to the often-seen rush by governments of today to capitalise the assets of valuable institutional properties, then baulking at the expense of fully supporting community based care. The authors present some views about the public/private divide.

Jenny Luntz begins to expound some ideas based on experience in the Victorian specialist child and family service arena around service coordination. It adds some appreciation of the complexity of issues around what is commonly promoted through case management models of service provision. Questions of knowledge and attitudes become important in marshalling the skills and resources necessary to respond to the more troubled of our children and young people. Their situations test structures, processes and people. Collaboration and how to achieve and maintain it is often essential in reaching positive outcomes or avoiding something worse.

Paul Ban and Phillip Swain begin a story also on family group conferencing. The approach originating in New Zealand is being piloted in Australia. This article, and another to follow, emanate from the evaluation. The Hawkins, McDonald, Davison, Coy team from South Australia have also commenced a much needed excursion into the territory of preventive work in child protection. As in so many other spheres of life our community labours under the delusion that catching the offender and getting them to court somehow fixes things. How refreshing it is to hear a broader view of the community's role and resources in this vexing area. It is an area which by its nature feeds media and politicians with the temptation to come up with simplistic solutions, while parents, children and practitioners struggle with heart rending dilemmas and tension, demanding responses over time and in depth and a range of accessible service options. We look forward to their following contribution as well. It will be one of some useful precursors to the Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect to be held in Melbourne in October next year.

Children Australia has pleasure again, through Meredith Kiraly's report, in adding weight to the efforts of AAYPIC (The Australian Association of Young People in Care) who are seeking to enable those children and young people who are or have been in out-of-home care, to share their knowledge and experience. Details are given of the views of young people in Canada involved in a similar undertaking. Such opportunities have much potential to improve both systems and individual outcomes. We hope that the experience of the September Conference in Sydney can also be reported. We hope that all Australians are listening.

Chris Goddard begins a story, based on events in the UK, of children in jeopardy from extreme adult demands. It is a story which enters the difficult territory of ritual abuse, where the spectre is raised of belief systems in conflict with the limits of tolerance. Tough terrain certainly, between the human propensity for witch hunts and our capacity for denial, but also not one to be ignored or too readily dismissed. ♦

Lloyd Owen