

Speaking for a moment about so-called “law reform” in family law matters, it has long concerned me that governments of both colours are prone to the risk of creating policies and legislative reforms which lack a sound empirical basis.

Sometimes, it would appear to meet the need for a response to a noisy political lobby – what NSW Law Reform Commissioner Reg Graycar in a soon to be published article calls “Law Reform by Frozen Chook”².

Other times, one suspects that the purported reform is a case of government seeking to make change for the sake of change.

The child and adolescent mental health field is no less at risk of such approaches. To my mind, it will be a strength of the Group that its expertise will extend to matters of research or lack thereof if similar situations arise.

It seems to me that consumer-oriented research receives less attention than it should generally, and that the deficit is compounded where the research focus concerns children and young people as consumers.

Looking again to the field of family law as a comparison, a glaring example in this regard is how children and young people view the quality and responsiveness of the lawyers who are appointed to represent their best interests in cases concerning their future residence or contact arrangements. I think the same can be said for children and young people represented on instructions in the Children’s Court of Victoria.

Regrettably, we have little in the way of structured research information on their views to guide how such services can be improved.

I suspect that similar critiques are open in the child and adolescent mental health field and hope that the Group can take a prime position in addressing that gap.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I am honoured to have been able to share some thoughts with you tonight at the launch of *Mental Health for the Young and Their Families: Victorian Group*. Its arrival is as significant as the issues it will be engaging. I would expect it has the potential to serve as a model for other States and Territories and to inform the national body.

In short, the Victorian Group is a very welcome enhancement to advocacy for children, young people and their families. I wish it all the very best.

¹ [Editorial Note: See Irene Verins “Social Connectedness and Freedom from Discrimination” *Australian Children’s Rights News* No. 27, November 2000, pp. 11-12.]

² See (2000) *Melbourne University Law Review* Vol. 24 No. 3 forthcoming.

Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent & Family Mental Health Association Ltd (AICAFMHA)

The Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent & Family Mental Health Association Ltd (AICAFMHA) is a newly formed association, which aims to actively promote the mental health and well being of infants, children, adolescents and their families or carers. The Secretary of the association, Sue Garvin explains its role.

The association has been under development since the inaugural Child and Adolescent Mental Health Conference in Adelaide in February 1995. A strong base of professional and consumer interest, along with financial support from the Commonwealth Government, has resulted in the association incorporating as a company in June 2000.

There is a growing awareness of mental health issues in Australia, largely bought about by considerable focus on the youth suicide rate, particularly of young men. The World Health Organisation has identified depression as one of the major illness burdens facing society over the next twenty years and a recent Western Australian survey found that up to 20% of Australian young people will experience a mental health problem.

Research within Australia and internationally indicates that many mental health problems affecting adults have their origin in childhood and adolescence. These facts illustrate that it is imperative to intervene early.

The AICAFMHA takes a broad view of mental health, ensuring activities promoting positive mental health, and prevention of mental disorders remain a priority. The association is unique in that it brings together professionals from a wide range of disciplines and consumers and carers in the one organisation.

In addition, the association recognises the particular mental health requirements of infants, children, adolescents and families and has identified the following key areas of emphasis:

- Raising general awareness of the special needs of these groups.
- A national approach to addressing infant, child, adolescent and family mental health issues.
- The involvement of people at a ‘grass roots’ level, that is, the workers in the field and the people who use the service.

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- Ensuring that members, both professional and consumer/carer, have clear and simple access to participation in activities and the ability to contribute to decision making processes.

The association actively encourages interested people to make suggestions about the range of services that the association provides. Association members and news/discussion list members are invited to participate in a market survey to determine priority areas of service development by the association.

You can contact the association directly on (08) 8132 0786 or via our website at <http://www.aicafmha.net.au/>. You will also find information at our website on the Association, membership, survey, email lists and previous and upcoming conference. Membership of the association is open to professionals, non-professionals, consumers and carers and as a special introductory offer, membership is currently available for \$22. You may also be interested in joining the AICAFMHA News and AICAFMHA Discussion email lists to stay up to date with association activities and share mental health information relevant to children and families.

While at the website, we invite you to consider attending the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association 4th National Conference to be held at the Carlton Crest Hotel, Brisbane, 28 –31 March 2001. The conference theme is Building Bridges – Promoting Mental Health for Families and Communities and provides a focus for consideration of collaborative research and practice in promotion of good mental health for all.

An outstanding program has been developed, with presentations from leading Australian and International experts in policy and practice, consumers and practitioners working directly with children and their families. Attendees will have the opportunity to learn about and participate in discussions on research, practice and topical issues in the field of infant, child, adolescent and family mental health.

This conference will be very relevant to those who are concerned with the wellbeing of infants, children and young people in a wide range of fields including education, welfare, juvenile justice, health and mental health. Conference attendees are expected from a variety of fields including child psychiatry, psychology, allied health, teaching, policy, legal services, social and youth work, consumers and carers.

Additional information about the conference is available on the website, or by contacting the Conference Secretariat:

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