

This issue of *Family Matters* contains a number of articles that draw on the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS), undertaken by the Institute on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. The ALSS was an ambitious project that required substantial investment of Institute resources over a number of years. In return it has yielded an extensive and rich set of data on Australian family wellbeing.

Previous issues of *Family Matters* have contained articles based on early analysis of ALSS data. However, the articles in this issue are the first to be published since the comprehensive final reports on the project were delivered to the Commonwealth Government last year. On pages 6–7 of this issue, AIFS Research Manager David de Vaus provides an overview and introduction to the ALSS papers. These, written by Institute researchers, comprise a selection from the extensive range of issues covered in the final reports. The articles consider aspects of housing, feelings of safety for children, access to medical services, the use of child care services, and service provision in general.

These articles are but an illustration of the extensive, complex material available in the ALSS data set. The Institute will continue to make use of the data set and further publications will appear in *Family Matters* and elsewhere. We are also exploring ways in which other researchers can have access to the ALSS data so that maximum use can be made of the information it contains, without compromising the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

### New Institute Logo

Observant readers of *Family Matters* will have noticed the new Institute logo on the back cover. In fact, we have been incorporating the new design into Institute publications over the past few months, but this is the first issue of *Family Matters* in which it has appeared. In preparing the brief for the new logo, we wanted to achieve a design which would reflect the Institute's ongoing concern to promote, through our research and related activities, the wellbeing of contemporary Australian families in all their diverse forms. As before, the AIFS initials are incorporated into the design, although more abstractly than previously.

### Institute Publications

The Institute has released two significant books recently. The first, published in association with Allen & Unwin, *Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia*, edited by former AIFS Research Fellow Robyn Hartley, was launched last November during the major conference of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia by the former Federal Minister for Family Services. The book comprises chapters on Australian families of Aboriginal, Chinese, Filipino, Greek, Italian, Latin-American, Lebanese and Vietnamese origin, together with chapters which explore the broad context of family



## DIRECTOR'S REPORT

### HARRY MCGURK

change and issues for Australian families in the future. Similarities and differences in patterns of parenting, marriage, kin, family life, child rearing and the role of older people are explored.

*Citizen Child: Australian Law and Children's Rights*, edited by Kathleen Funder, a Principal Fellow with the Institute, was released in March this year. The volume comprises a collection of articles written to inform service providers, policy makers and the public of the implications of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in areas of education, health, child welfare, juvenile justice, family law and income support.

The columns on pages 63–64 of this issue of *Family Matters* provide further details on both of these new books, and information on how to order copies.

### Visitors to the Institute

Recently we have had the pleasure of welcoming a number of overseas visitors to the Institute. In December 1995 we were visited by the Indonesian Minister for Population, Dr Haryono Suyono. His Government is interested in establishing an Institute similar to the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Following the visit of the Minister, three senior members of his staff were our guests for several days at the end of January, when they learned in detail about the research and dissemination activities of the Institute, about our funding and administrative infrastructure.

At the beginning of March three senior administrators from the Malaysian National Population and Family Development Board visited the Institute. Their interest was also in our research and information programs, again from the point of view of developing similar programs in Malaysia.

It is gratifying to learn from visits like these of the extent to which the Institute is perceived by our Asian neighbours as a model for the role that an independent Institute can play in providing a research input to the development of policies and services to promote family wellbeing.

In February the Institute sponsored a visit to Australia by three members of the Dartington Social Research Unit, University of Bristol – a Department of Health funded research centre. Mr Rupert Hughes is a Fellow of the Unit and recently retired Westminster Senior Civil Servant. He is widely regarded in the United Kingdom as the architect of the Children Act 1989, a major piece of reforming legislation particularly concerned with child welfare. Professors Roger Bullock and Spencer Milham are respectively the current and immediate past Directors of the Dartington Unit.

While in Australia, as well as making a presentation at the Institute, Messrs Hughes, Milham and Bullock presented workshops on the reform of child protection administration and practice to child protection personnel in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria, as well as to members of the Commonwealth Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators. Some of the issues considered at these workshops are reflected in what I have written below about the crisis in Child Protection Services in Australia.

### Demands Grow on Child Protection Services

Child protection services throughout Australia are under increasing pressure. Consider the following statistics. Across Australia in 1990–91, there were 49,721 reported cases of suspected child abuse; the corresponding figures for 1991–92, 1992–93 and 1993–94 are 53,296, 59,122 and 74,436 respectively; the projected figure for 1994–95 is of the order of 80,000. Over the same time period the proportion of *substantiated* cases of child abuse (that is, the ratio between the number of confirmed cases and the number of cases actually investigated following a report) has remained fairly constant, fluctuating between 43 and 46 per cent.

It follows that both the *absolute* and the *relative* frequencies of confirmed cases of child maltreatment in Australia have increased over the past five years. Considered in terms of the numbers of children involved, the incidence of confirmed cases of child maltreatment has increased from about 4.1 per thousand in 1990–91 to an estimated 6.5 per thousand for 1994–95.

On the basis of these data, it would be inappropriate to leap to the conclusion that the true incidence of child maltreatment in Australia is rising dramatically. The rate of reporting is certainly increasing and is creating enormous strain on the ability of protection services to cope. On the other hand, we do not have enough information at present to enable us to determine whether

the figures represent a real increase in the frequency of child maltreatment, or an increase in the willingness of professionals and others to report instances of suspected maltreatment of which they become aware, or a systematic lowering of the threshold for what we choose to interpret as maltreatment. The

Institute now on the Internet  
<http://www.aifs.org.au>

The Home Page of the Australian Institute of Family Studies is now accessible via the World Wide Web.

For details see the 'Family Research News' column by Deborah Whithear in this issue of *Family Matters*.

research necessary to resolve these issues has not been carried out in Australia.

**T**hat the third of these alternatives may indeed have some credibility is suggested by comparison between the levels of reporting of child maltreatment concerns in Australia compared with the United Kingdom.

There are a number of differences between the two countries which indicate that such comparisons should only be made with caution – for example, all states and territories in Australia (with the exception of Western Australia and the ACT) have mandatory reporting legislation in operation, while in the United Kingdom there is no such legislation. Accordingly, the interpretation of contrasting data can only be indicative, not definitive. The contrast, however, can be enlightening.

In 1992, England and Wales, between them, had a child population of about 11 million compared with around 4.3 million 0–16-year-olds in Australia. In that year approximately 160,000 children were referred to the child protection process in England and Wales. *Pro rata*, we would have expected there to be about 62,500 reports to the Australian child protection services. In fact, as indicated above, there were 59,100 child maltreatment reports in Australia in 1992–93. Thus, Australia on the one hand and England and Wales on the other were more or less level pegging in the incidence of *reported* child maltreatment.

In England and Wales about 25 per cent of the cases reported in 1992 were eliminated from consideration following informal enquiries, and a further 50 per cent were eliminated after one visit to the family home

by social services staff. In terms of the actions taken over the remaining cases, only about 25 per cent of the overall total of UK cases would have merited 'substantiation'. By contrast, 46 per cent of Australian reports of suspected abuse in 1992–93 were classified as substantiated.

Thus, in 1992, Australia and the United Kingdom were comparable with respect to the *reporting* of suspected child abuse, but in the UK many fewer cases were judged to merit the equivalent of substantiation. Moreover, since 1992, there has been a 50 per cent increase in the reporting of suspected child maltreatment in Australia (while the proportion of substantiations has remained more or less constant); there has been no comparable increase in UK reporting.

Are we to conclude, then, that Australia is a more child abusive society than the UK and is becoming increasingly so? Or that Australia is a more compassionate society, more caring towards its children and less tolerant of standards of parenting that are considered acceptable in the United Kingdom? Or that there is indeed drift in the way in which child maltreatment is being defined in Australia? We are in dire need of good evidence to answer such critical questions.

**W**hatever the resolution of these matters, child protection services in the majority of the states and territories of Australia are presently being stretched near to breaking point as a consequence of the demands made on them by increased reporting of child maltreatment concerns.

In reality, these services are in danger of becoming protective in name only; the overwhelming proportion of their meagre

resource is currently devoted to the essentially *forensic* task, following a report, of determining whether an abusive incident has in fact occurred. Few resources are available to provide supportive services to families subjected to investigation, despite the fact that a substantial proportion of the families involved are under genuine stress. Many families feel stigmatised and alienated by the investigative process. However, where no child maltreatment is established (the majority of cases), the families involved do not routinely receive counselling or other forms of support.

Whenever a child abuse report is substantiated or a child is deemed to be at risk of significant harm, then (except where court action is taken by protection services) the families involved are usually referred on, voluntarily or otherwise, to a family service agency while child protection staff continue their statutory investigative role with other cases. There is little coordination between child protection and other support services for families or between child protection and primary care, although primary care staff are often well placed to play a preventative role.

Child protection in Australia is a matter of concern to Commonwealth and to State and Territory Government, and they must work together to secure the safety and wellbeing of the nation's children. Cooperation takes place within the context of two bodies – the Canberra based National Child Protection Council (NCPC) and, under the general umbrella of COAG, the Standing Committee of Community Services and Income Security Administrators (SCCISA). Within these bodies there is recognition that, with similar

## MINISTER VISITS INSTITUTE

On Friday 22 March 1996 the new Commonwealth Minister for Family Services, the Honourable Judi Moylan, MP, made her first formal visit to the Institute. During her visit the Minister had discussions with the Institute's Board of Management and later chatted with staff over an informal lunch.

Mrs Moylan's appointment as Minister for Family Services in the new Government was announced only on 9 March and it was a particular pleasure to be able to welcome her to the Institute so early in her ministry.



From left: Ms Ann Sherry, Presiding Member of the AIFS Board of Management, is pictured with AIFS staff members Judy Adams, Library Manager, and Ruth Weston, Senior Research Fellow.



From left: The Minister for Family Services, the Hon Judi Moylan, and AIFS Director, Dr Harry McGurk, talk with AIFS Library Officer, Anita Emmanouilidis.



AIFS Research Manager Dr David de Vaus (left), and Senior Research Fellow Helen Glezer (centre), in conversation with Minister for Family Services, the Hon Judi Moylan (right). In the background are Research Officer, Wendy Stone, and Accountant Grant Plozza.