



Since the last issue of *Family Matters* the Institute has been represented at several major research conferences.

The International Social Security Association's conference, 'Social Security in the Global Village', held in Helsinki, Finland, in September 2000, covered a wide array of research topics, including issues to do with the social protection of families. The Institute presented a paper at this conference on the topic 'Social capital, social cohesion and social security' which was well received. The paper formed part of the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project. The Institute is currently involved in data collection for this project, involving a national random sample of about 2000 respondents and will be presenting findings during 2001. This is an exciting area as there has been much theoretical discussion of issues of social capital, and now we will be testing empirically measures of social capital in family and community life. This will place the Institute at the leading edge in the development and application of the concept of social capital. This research will contribute to an understanding of how families meet and balance their commitments to family responsibilities and the community.

A conference was held in Melbourne in November 2000 on 'Welfare Reform', hosted by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. Welfare reform was also a key theme for discussion at the Australian Council of Social Service National Congress in Canberra in November. The ACOSS Congress had the theme: 'Just Policy, Sound Research, Joint Action – A Winning Formula'.

There was vigorous discussion at both of these conferences on the advantages and disadvantages of current proposals for welfare reform, as well as the implications for administration. At both conferences a number of keynote presenters emphasised the importance of history. They pointed to the long and unique history of the social security system in Australia – particularly the general revenue financing of the system and the use of flat-rate and means-tested payments, and how this distinguished our system from those of many other developed countries, and

has done so since the early 1900s. The efficient targeting of the Australian system to those on low incomes and those who are generally disadvantaged was emphasised, while it was noted that this in itself may contribute to complexity, and that the adequacy of payments has to be kept firmly in mind by governments if the system is to be fully effective.

There was a sense that we should be very conscious that *where we are* in the development of our social protection system in Australia reflects *where we have been*. Issues of mutual or reciprocal obligation, while topical over recent years, have been a key attribute of the system for many years, particularly for the unemployed. There was also a sense that we should be very conscious of our past experiences with social policy reform in Australia and the lessons that may be taken as well as the lessons of research. We have witnessed many inquiries and reviews in Australia in the area of social protection, including major examinations such as the Poverty Inquiry in the early 1970s, the Income Security Review in the late 1970s, and the Social Security Review in the 1980s. Tax Credits, Negative Income Tax, and Guaranteed Minimum Income schemes have been topics of discussion and consideration throughout this period. The difficulty of balancing adequacy, incentives, and simplicity, while at the same time achieving systems that are affordable and sustainable, will continue to be a challenge.

These are important areas of research that need to be considered in the context of social protection, particularly incentive issues and their impact on families. The Institute will be developing research programs in these areas to better understand the transition from welfare to work, the relative importance of financial incentives in family decisions to participate in the workforce, and the general interaction of work and family life.

While many spoke at these conferences in general support of the directions recommended by the Reference Group on Welfare Reform in the McClure Report (*Participation Support for a More Equitable Society*), they often also noted that 'the devil was in the detail' and that to be successful new programs must also be capable of efficient and effective administration.

At the same time as the conference on welfare reform another conference was under way at the University of Melbourne on 'The Critical Early Childhood Years'. This conference brought together academics and practitioners with an interest in childhood development, an area that has received close attention in recent years, with emphasis on the long-term benefits of early intervention.

Institute launches new book

In November 2000 a special party was held for young people (and their families) who are participating in the Australian Temperament Project (ATP). The gathering was to celebrate the first 18 years of the project and to launch the book *Pathways from Infancy to Adolescence: Australian Temperament Project, 1983–2000*, published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The ATP is a longitudinal study of 2000 Victorian children born in 1982–83 that has followed their psychosocial development from infancy onwards. This study has received extensive media coverage, indicating a broad interest in the interesting findings of this unique study. (See elsewhere in this issue for further details.)

Staffing matters

In October 2000, Professor Peter Saunders completed his contract as the Institute's Research Manager. Associate Professor Ann Sanson, Principal Research Fellow in the Children and Parenting Program, is currently acting in the position of Research Manager, pending advertisement. During the period Ms Sarah Wise is acting as Principal Research Fellow in the Children and Parenting Program.

In December 2000 Associate Professor Belinda Fehlberg, Head of the Family and Marriage Program, left the Institute to resume her position at the University of Melbourne, as Reader in Law. Dr Grania Sheehan is acting as Principal Research Fellow in this program, pending advertisement.

I'm pleased to take this opportunity to thank Peter Saunders and Belinda Fehlberg for their valuable contributions to the Institute.

Dr Matthew Gray has started at the Institute as Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Family and Society Program and is further developing the

Institute's research program on social policy issues and the family.

Having completed a major evaluation of the Commonwealth Government's National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, Penny Mitchell has taken a secondment to the Victorian Government Department of Human Services. And three of the Institute's researchers, Grania Sheehan, Adam Tomison and Virginia Lewis, have been awarded Doctorates. Best wishes to all!

New Ministry

On 19 December 2000 Senator Jocelyn Newman announced that she would stand down from the Howard Government Ministry. Senator Newman was Minister for Social Security and then Minister for Family and Community services for the past five years. The Prime Minister announced (also on 19 December) that Senator Amanda Vanstone would be replacing Senator Newman as Minister for Family and Community Services as well as Minister assisting the Prime Minister in matters relating to the status of women. The new Ministry was sworn in by the Governor General on 30 January 2001.

The Family and Community Services Portfolio was created following the Election of October 1998 with Senator Newman as the foundation Minister. The Australian Institute of Family Services was transferred to the new portfolio from the previous Health and Family Services Portfolio.

I would like to thank Senator Newman for the close interest she has shown in the Institute over the years and for all her support, in particular her support for research on family-related issues. We all wish her well in the next phase of her life.

