

Acting Director's report

A N N S A N S O N



Departure of David de Vaus



After a period of 18 months as part-time Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, *David de Vaus* is returning to full-time employment at La Trobe University. He has been appointed as Professor of Sociology, and will be taking up the role of Head of the School of Social Sciences. We congratulate him warmly on this appointment, which he richly deserves, but are sorry that it means that we lose him.

David has had a long history of involvement with the Institute, having been here previously as Research Manager over the period 1995 to 1998. During this latest period, he shared management responsibility with me for Institute research programs and contracts, which allowed me to work also as Project Director for the Growing Up in Australia study.

His time at the Institute has been extremely productive. He has been generous and wise with his advice to our researchers; he has initiated and brought to completion a number of joint projects; he has represented the Institute at a large number of forums; and he has been very supportive of me during a very busy time. I record my grateful thanks for all this.

We look forward to continued collaboration with David, who will retain a position as Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute. In particular, we are looking forward to the publication, later in the year, of his book, *Diversity and change in Australian families: A statistical profile*, which I am confident will be a very valuable resource for all with an interest in Australian families.

The Board of Management and members of staff join me in wishing David all the very best for the future.

"Child custody" debate continues

The last edition of *Family Matters* presented a number of papers concerning the debate about caring for children after parental separation, stimulated by the Australian Government's Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation. Given the relevance of much past and current Institute research to this topic, the Institute contributed a substantial written submission to the Inquiry, and Institute researcher *Bruce Smyth and I* made a personal appearance before the committee.

As the Inquiry reaches its closing phases, the topic continues to be hotly debated. In our Family Law column in this edition, Institute researcher *Catherine Caruana* reports on a forum held on 13 November 2003 titled "Joint Rebuttable Custody: In the Child's Best Interests?", hosted by the Australian Family Mediation Association and the new Roundtable Dispute Management unit at Victoria Legal Aid.

Vale

While the Institute has been active and productive on many fronts over recent months, we have also been deeply saddened by the sudden and untimely loss of a friend and colleague, *Christine McCarthy* (see box opposite). Chris touched all of our lives and she is greatly missed.

Greetings

Let me take this opportunity to send Season's Greetings and best wishes for a happy, peaceful and productive new year to all readers of *Family Matters*.

A.S.

OVERVIEW

Ageing: Issues

I have pleasure in introducing readers to this issue of *Family Matters* which focuses on multiple aspects of ageing as it impacts on Australia's families. Ageing is a topic which is going to be of increasing salience to Australia, and where there is a clear need for sound research evidence, policy analysis and informed comment. Over the next 30 years Australia's population will age, with a number of social and economic consequences. Further, the roles of older people in Australian society are diverse and changing. This edition seeks to contribute to the knowledge base and the debate about both these complex issues.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has a history of research on ageing and families, and it is an area of continuing activity. The Institute's 2002-2005 Research Plan highlights ageing as one focus for our future research. The importance of increasing the knowledge base around ageing is also reflected in the inclusion of "ageing well, ageing productively" as a priority goal under the National Research Priority goal of "promoting and maintaining good health".

This introduction first offers a brief discussion of some of the issues associated with population ageing. An overview is then provided of the set of papers in this edition which take various approaches to understanding the effects and consequences of ageing for Australian families, and the roles of older people within families. Within this set of papers are four by Institute researchers, and four contributions by external authors. Readers are also alerted to some of the other material in this edition (see previous column).

One of the important roles of the Institute is to stimulate research on emerging issues for Australian families, and so we also offer some suggestions for directions for future research (see accompanying box). This was compiled by *Matthew Gray*, the Principal Research Fellow in the Family and Society Research Program at the Institute, and *David de Vaus*, the Institute's Senior Research Adviser. I also record my thanks to Matthew Gray for his work in coordinating the content of this edition.

Anticipated consequences of population ageing

Of course, the shape of Australia's population in 30 or 50 years time is uncertain, as are the consequences of population ageing. The anticipated problems of an ageing society are based on projections about the future trajectories of a range of economic and social factors (for example, labour force participation, retirement

for Australian families

ages and productivity growth). These predictions are founded on the world as we know it now.

But the world has a habit of changing in ways which we do not anticipate. In a period of low fertility in the early 1930s the “baby boom” of the late 1940s and early 1950s was not anticipated. And the possibility of population ageing was barely mentioned in the 1975 Report of the National Population Inquiry (the Borrie Report). Nevertheless, we clearly need to take these projections seriously, at the same time as trying to refine them.

“Ageing is the biggest economic and social issue facing Australia today” (the Hon. Kevin Andrews MP, Media Release, 29 October 2002). This statement by the then Minister for Ageing illustrates recognition by government of the far-reaching significance of population ageing. With an older population in the next 25 to 30 years, some of the economic and social arrangements that have worked reasonably well with a younger population profile will not be appropriate.

Discussions of population ageing have been framed largely in terms of increased costs (for example, health, aged care

accommodation and social safety net payments) at the same time as the taxation base shrinks due to the smaller proportion of the population who are of the traditional working age.

Some predict that this will result in competition between younger and older generations for government resources, with intergenerational conflict replacing intergenerational solidarity. Ian MacFarlane, Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia, recently stated: “If we are not careful, there is a potential for conflict between generations. The young may resent the tax burden imposed on them to pay for pension and health expenditure to the old” (Address to 2003 Melbourne Institute Economic and Social Outlook Conference Dinner, Melbourne, 13 November 2003).

Some of the commonly mentioned potential solutions to the “problems” generated by population ageing are increasing fertility rates, increasing labour force participation rates, increasing retirement ages, increasing the extent to which people make financial provisions so as to support themselves in later life, and containing the growth in public health expenditures. ▶

The Acting Director, members of staff and the Board of Management of the Australian Institute of Family Studies deeply regret the untimely passing of our colleague Christine McCarthy, on 8 October 2003.

Chris joined the Institute in July 1999 as the Institute's Survey Operations Manager, with responsibility for the operational aspects of surveys conducted by the Institute, including Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), and face-to-face and mail-out surveys.

Chris made an immensely valuable contribution to the work of the Institute. She had the uncanny knack of recruiting and training fine teams of competent interviewers, and then calmly motivating them to provide high quality work. This contributed greatly to the success of contract research projects such as Healthy Retirement and other surveys for Lincoln Gerontology, the International Youth Development Study for the Centre for Adolescent Health, and Institute projects such as the Social Capital project and, more recently, the Child Care Choices study.

Chris lived a full and varied life. Born in Yorkshire in 1943, she had a variety of jobs before returning to study in 1965 and completing her BA Hons Degree in Politics, Philosophy and History at the University of Lancaster in 1968. Then came work and travel. For nine years (1968–1977) Chris lived in Laos where she was a primary school teacher at the International School in Vientiane. There, she taught classes of children aged five to ten years, in English and Laotian; she also taught English as a second language.

On returning to London in 1977, Chris worked as Chief Operator (Communications), training computer operators and maintaining communications and hardware for a large developer of market research



Christine McCarthy

7 December 1943 – 8 October 2003

software. During this time she helped start up the company's first office in the United States.

Chris came to Melbourne in 1987 to take up a position with the Reark Group, where she was initially responsible for computer support and subsequently became Manager of one of Australia's largest CATI teams. She was at Reark for eight years, where she made many lifelong friends.

During her four years with the Institute, Chris was an unfailingly cheerful and generous colleague. She was always interesting and fun to be with – *especially* as she was the provider of dishes of sweets, sumptuous fruits,

and exotic morsels of foreign delights such as fresh rambutan or dried tamarind – offered to all! Her bowls of flowers and dried arrangements, and her home-made Christmas decorations each December, kept the office alive and interesting. She had a wonderful, sometimes quirky, sense of style. And who can forget her distinctive garb, her jaunty hats, and oft-changing hair styles!

She was a great participant in the life of the Institute and we will miss her unique style – her wit, wisdom and kindness. A true individual, she was also a loyal team player – a special person who touched the lives of everyone who knew her.

Without complaint, Chris put up with periods of ill health over the past year. It was a great shock when one such episode flared into the peritonitis that took her life.

We extend our sincere condolences to Chris's husband Mike, and hope that he can find some consolation in the genuinely deep affection that so many people here felt for Chris.

Ross Millward, on behalf of colleagues at the Institute

The Prime Minister has recently called for “all levels of government, business and the community to work together to help encourage older workers so that Australia can sustain its high levels of economic growth into the future” (Media Release: 27 August 2003).

Opportunities as well as costs

While it is important to respond to the anticipated problems generated by population ageing, a balanced approach takes account of the potential benefits as well.

Discussions of ageing frequently adopt a stereotype of older people as dependent, in poor health and in need of care and support. This stereotype is particularly evident in problem-oriented approaches to ageing where the focus is on the negative aspects of ageing and the costs of ageing. The then Minister for Ageing, the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, has drawn attention to this problem: “One of the main challenges facing an ageing population is to overcome these negative stereotypes which hinder the participation and encouragement of older people in our society” (Address to the 6th Global Conference of the International Federation on Ageing, Perth, 29 October 2002).

Similarly, the Shadow Minister for Ageing and Seniors, the Hon. Annette Ellis MP, highlighted the positive contribution of older people to the community: “It is important that we acknowledge that Australians aged 65 years and over lead very active lives, and contribute much to our communities through their volunteer work, assistance to their families and participation in their communities” (Media Statement, 18 March 2003).

A more sophisticated view of population ageing recognises that the meaning of chronological age and of population ageing changes over time and between cultures. Australia’s population has been ageing steadily since at least the 1860s when just 2 per cent of the population was aged over 65 years. In 2001, over 13 per cent were aged over 65. But the meaning of chronological age is socially, historically and culturally determined. What it meant to be 65

in 1860 is very different from its meaning and consequences in 2003, and most probably from its meaning in 2050.

Ageing and families

The main emphasis of policy makers and researchers has been on the economic and health consequences of an ageing society. While the roles of families have been acknowledged in discussions of research and policy priorities (mainly in the context of care provision), less attention has been given to the links between family issues and ageing issues. This is surprising given that families play a major part in shaping our lives at all points in the life course.

The roles of older people within families, as well as in the broader society, have also been under-examined. These roles differ across different cultural groups, and so the experiences of older people born in, and outside of, Australia can be expected to differ. Further, the roles of grandparents as child carers have changed markedly as it has become the norm for both parents to participate in paid work outside the home. Older people also at times find themselves becoming full-time carers for their grandchildren when, for one reason or another, the biological parents are unable to care for them. Little research has examined the experiences of older people in these situations.

Overview of papers in this edition

The articles in this edition of *Family Matters* seek to shed light on some of the issues raised above. The first paper, by Institute researchers *Ruth Weston, Lixia Qu and Grace Soriano*, continues the Institute’s tradition of drawing together data on demographic trends and analysing their implications. It provides an overview of the changing demographic face of Australia, its age structure and cultural diversity, and explores the implications of these trends for future older Australians and their families.

Two papers have a focus on macro issues to do with ageing. In one of these, *Jonathan Bradshaw and Emese*

ISSUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ON AGEING AND FAMILIES

In addition to the ageing and family links outlined in this edition of *Family Matters*, there are a number of other important areas of research in the ageing and family area that warrant further attention. Among these are the following broad topic areas.

The contributions of older people to their family

To what extent do older people provide financial and non financial transfers to younger family members? What are the expectations and values among older people and younger people regarding support from older family members?

The role of families in supporting older people

To what extent do older people receive physical and emotional care from family members? Who provides care? What is the cost saving to governments of caring provided by family members for older Australians? How do older people without younger family members available manage? What are the costs and benefits to families of the responsibilities that they accept for elder care?

The interface between work and family

Increases in the number of older people combined with increased employment rates of women has implications for the

capacity of women to provide support for elderly family members. This has implications for employers who have employees with elder care responsibilities and for governments that rely on this unpaid work.

Maintaining labour force participation among older workers

The abolition of compulsory, age-based retirement means that people can continue to work beyond the age of 65 years. As this becomes a policy goal we need to understand the role of family related factors in decisions about early retirement and decisions to continue in the paid workforce.

Grandparenting

With the possible exception of the role of grandparents in the provision of child care, we know remarkably little about the role and experience of grandparenting in contemporary Australia. We need to know more about the nature of grandparents’ relationships with their grandchildren, the impact they have on their grandchildren’s lives, and the factors that help to make this a positive experience for both parties. While the papers in this edition start to shed light on the question, we need to know

Mayhew address the arguments about intergenerational competition for resources. They examine the extent to which ageing has resulted in a shifting of public expenditure systematically in favour of the elderly at the expense of children in selected OECD countries over the last 20 years. Their conclusion is that there is currently little evidence of



a trade-off in expenditure between these two groups.

The paper by *David de Vaus* and *Matthew Gray* (Institute researchers) and *David Stanton* (social policy consultant) tackles the negative stereotypes of older people head-on by presenting estimates of the value of the unpaid work done at different stages of life. This paper clearly demonstrates the substantial voluntary contribution that older people make to society, both within and outside their households, emphasising that older people should not be considered

merely a “cost”. A fuller version of this paper has been published as an Institute Research Paper, and it has been rewarding to observe the keen media interest in its findings.

The article by the *Seniors and Means Test Branch of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services* draws attention to some of the links between family and ageing issues and the ways in which family policy initiatives can address some of these issues.

Older people have widely diverging experiences. Several articles examine the experiences of older people in different circumstances. The article by Institute researchers *Lixia Qu* and *Ruth Weston* uses data from the HILDA survey to examine the relationship between older people’s living arrangements and their sense of personal wellbeing. They

conclude that, while older people are in general doing quite well, those who live alone appear to be more vulnerable to loneliness and report lower levels of satisfaction with life.

Given that the meaning and expectations of old age vary by culture, the experience of older people from different ethnic groups will also vary. Ethnicity is linked to values and beliefs regarding family obligations and roles, and the migration experience adds another layer of complexity to this. The paper by *Trang Thomas*, “Older migrants and their families in Australia”, alerts us to some of the difficulties that can be encountered by older people and their families as both older and younger generations attempt to make adjustments to a new country and a new culture.

In further investigations of the roles of older people within their families, two papers examine some of the wide diversity of experiences of grandparents. While many older people eagerly anticipate grandchildren and take joy in their relationship with them, some find themselves having a different grandparenting role from the one they might have imagined. The paper by *Joy Goodfellow* and *Judy Laverty* highlights the diversity of experiences, and some of the ambivalences, of grandparents who act as child carers while the child’s parents are at work. In the *Family Matters* Opinion column, *Margot Fitzpatrick* and *Patricia Reeve* from the Council on the Ageing, alert us to the significant stresses and difficulties that can be encountered by some of these grandparents who end up raising their grandchildren themselves because of parental incapacity.

I hope this edition of *Family Matters* serves to contribute to thinking about how we should be responding to the needs of older people as well as to the anticipated population trends in the future. Ageing will continue to be a focus of Institute research, and we welcome readers’ ideas about issues in need of investigation.

more about the costs and benefits of grandparenting. Further, little is known about the difficulties that grandparents may have in gaining access to their grandchildren – especially where family breakdown has occurred.

Beliefs and attitudes about intergenerational obligations

A common assumption regarding families and ageing is that older people are happy to accept care from their adult children and that their children accept these responsibilities. A clear understanding of the actual beliefs and attitudes held by various segments of the population is needed to provide a better guide to their likely impact on policy initiatives.

Supporting family relationships in later life

Much ageing policy assumes a family that functions reasonably well. But this cannot be assumed. We need to know more about marital quality in later life and to identify ways in which such marriages can be strengthened and supported as couples experience some very big transitions. Similarly, links between adults and their older parents are generally assumed to play an important role in later life and much social policy assumes

that these relationships are active and positive. However, we know very little about the quality of these intergenerational relationships and they can deliver the types of supports that policies assume.

Changing family structures

Family structures are changing at a rapid rate. People are having fewer children and are having them later in life. More people are expected to remain childless. Divorce and complex family structures all have potential implications for the part that families play in the lives of older people.

Changing gender roles

Since the 1970s there have been considerable changes in attitudes about gender roles. These changes have the potential to impact on family relationships and patterns of care and support in later life. So far we know very little about how these changes will flow through to later life, for example by affecting older men’s and women’s ways of managing later life and the care and support provided by other family members.

David de Vaus and Matthew Gray