

Director's report

ALAN HAYES



Anniversaries, such as this in our 25th year, provide a wonderful opportunity to acknowledge our past, and all those who have contributed to the Institute's first quarter century. They also are a time to look to the future. While acknowledging our past achievements, our focus this year has been both on the present circumstances and the future prospects of the Institute. This has been a year in which we have taken stock, reviewed our priorities, operations and organisation and framed plans for the future. Our gaze has been predominantly outward. A key element that has focused our attention above the horizon has been the research consultation program, now completed.

Research consultations

The research consultations started in Darwin on 12 August. Consultations followed in every other state and territory capital, and a selection of regional centres, concluding in Canberra. The meetings were well attended and involved very worthwhile discussions. Among the themes that emerged were the need for a better understanding of relationships, their formation, transitions, pathways and outcomes; the role of the Institute in collating the evidence for particular approaches to interventions focused on families; the Family Law reforms, including the need for evaluation of the Family Relationship Centres initiative; as well as the need for research on family impacts of the key social policy developments. Also especially highlighted were some of the issues that relate to Indigenous families, and families in regional, rural and remote locations.

The response from key stakeholders was very pleasing. I thank all staff who helped to make the consultation program such a success, and of course all those who generously gave their time to attend and provide invaluable insights into future research needs.

House of Representatives

On Tuesday 2 August, staff of the Institute appeared before the Melbourne hearings of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family. I am pleased to report that the Institute was congratulated on the quality of its submission. We have been called to appear at a future hearing, probably in Canberra, so that the Inquiry can take evidence on the areas of the submission that limited time precluded being considered at the Melbourne hearing. The Institute's contributions on work and family issues across the years were included in many of the other submissions to the Inquiry.

Family law forum

The Chief Justice extended an invitation for Dr Matthew Gray and I to attend the Family Law Forum. The Forum brings together representatives from the courts, governments, cognate professions and the community. I am delighted that in this 25th anniversary year we have two seats on the Forum.

Board meeting

The Board has met on 8 September and 9 December. I was delighted to extend a welcome to the new members of the Board

of Management, Angela MacRae, Marie Leech and Professor John Dewar, to their first meeting. Each brings a wealth of experience and expertise to the Board that will be invaluable to the Institute. I especially acknowledge the great assistance that Narda Sowter has given in preparing for the meetings over her 16 years with us. Narda's contributions to the smooth running of the Board, and on so many other fronts, are greatly appreciated. We wish Narda well in her retirement.

Work and family awards - final judging meeting

With Michael Alexander, I participated in the judging for the Work and Family Awards and, in November, we both attended the Awards Dinner held in Sydney. The Institute has participated in the judging of the Awards from their inception.

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS)

The Institute has established in recent months, under the leadership of Helen Cheney, the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA). In addition to being a key element of the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, CAFCA will have a major role in disseminating the learnings and examples of Promising Practice Profiles from the initiatives funded under the Strategy.

We are now working with the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales (SPRC) to undertake the national evaluation of the SFCS. Our two prime areas of involvement are the compilation of Promising Practice Profiles by CAFCA, and the planning of the Family Study, which will be a short term, longitudinal evaluation in a number of Communities for Children sites around the country. It is proposed to base the Family Study on the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and the aim is to be in the field early in 2006.

I have been advised that the Minister has now approved extra funding for the National Evaluation and funding to support CAFCA. I look forward to being involved in the evaluation and I am delighted at the capacity that we are marshalling. This is a wonderful opportunity to make a major contribution to a key area of Australian Government policy for children, families and communities.

I have also been actively involved in the work of the Stronger Families and Communities Partnership, and had the rare privilege of participating in a site visit to the Kimberleys. The problems and the prospects of a small Indigenous community have left a deep impression. The enthusiasm of those involved with the Communities for Children project is equally impressive. The visit reinforced for me the importance of the Institute engaging in research focused on Indigenous families and the issues that confront them.

Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

The review of the Wave 2 content is reaching its end and the dress rehearsal has been completed. Film Australia is well advanced in the production of a documentary on LSAC, with

filming underway. I am pleased to announce that Associate Professor Ann Sanson, former Acting Director of the Institute, has a continuing role with LSAC, although she has now moved to direct the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth/Australian Research Council Network Future Generations, based at the department of Paediatrics at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. Ann is now the Principal Scientific Advisor to LSAC, and I am delighted that she is maintaining her close involvement with the project. As Executive Director, Dr Gray will provide strategic leadership and will be responsible for overseeing the day-to-day management of LSAC.

Vietnam's National Family Survey

Ruth Weston recently visited Hanoi to assist in the development of Vietnam's first National Family Survey. I am delighted to see that her suggestions about the basic design of the survey have been adopted. Her last visit focused on the actual measures to be incorporated in the survey. Her aim has been to suggest measures that will enable baseline indicators of family wellbeing for a country undergoing rapid modernization and provide international comparisons, while ensuring that all measures are sensitive to the cultures and socio-economic conditions in Vietnam. Officers of the funding body, UNICEF, have consistently indicated that they are extremely impressed with Ruth's contribution and I have just received a letter from Mr Le Do Ngoc, Executive Director for the Family, Commission for Population, Family and Children (VCPFC) expressing his appreciation. This work helps to fulfil agreements made in the Memorandum of Understanding between FaCS and VCPFC regarding both the sharing of information and expertise between Vietnam and Australia, and the policies and programs for families, children and youth.

Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault

I am pleased to report, that funding has been announced for the continuation of the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault. Dr Melanie Heenan and her team are to be congratulated on their efforts during the first two years of the Centre's operations.

International forum

The Institute hosted an International Forum, *Family Relationships in Transition*, which was held in the Public Theatre in Parliament House, Canberra, on 1 and 2 December. It brought together international and national keynote speakers. An invitation-only meeting, with 100 delegates and 100 observers, the program included a message of Welcome from the Prime Minister and addresses by the Governor-General, the Attorney-General, Minister Patterson, the Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia, the Chief Federal Magistrate along with several international keynote speakers. Delegates attended from the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam. A number of key meetings also took place with delegates from the East Asia Region. The planning for this event was a mammoth task and I extend our sincere thanks to those who worked so hard to bring this to fruition, from the Institute and from the Departments of the

Attorney-General and Family and Community Services. The Forum took place with the generous support and assistance of the two Departments and was a fitting culmination to the Institute's 25th Anniversary year. A more detailed report will be included in the next edition of *Family Matters*.

Family Relationship Clearinghouse

During the opening session of the International Forum the Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator Kay Patterson, announced the allocation of the funding to the Australian Institute of Family Studies to establish and operate the new Family Relationship Clearinghouse. The purpose of the Clearinghouse is to facilitate exchange of information about family relationships throughout life. It will also distribute information about best practice and innovative service delivery approaches across the range of family relationship services, from prevention and early intervention to post separation.

Closing comments

In addition to being our Anniversary Year, 2005 has been a year of change. We have focused on the future of the Institute and laying the foundation for our next quarter century. It has also been my first full year as Director. The year has brought the right mix of challenge, achievement and fulfilment, and the support I have received from staff has been remarkable. It is indeed a rare privilege to work with colleagues who bring such talent, enthusiasm, energy and commitment to their work.



Meredith Michie retires

After 22 years at the helm of the Institute's publishing unit, Meredith Michie retired in October 2005, making this edition of *Family Matters* her last.

Meredith saw the magazine through its transformation from its old newsletter format to the more substantial publication we know today.

Meredith's legacy to the Institute is far more than the 65 editions of *Family Matters*, the books, reports and research papers she edited and published over her time here. It was her commitment to making the Institute's research accessible to a wide audience, in formats that could be read by students, as well as academics, politicians and policy-makers that have shaped the Institute's publications.

Meredith's contribution to the Institute was far more than simply editing. With a knowledge acquired after editing more than 700 separate research papers, Meredith was an important part of the Institute's knowledge base. She would sit for hours with researchers, teasing out the key points of their research, shaping ideas and creating products that were not only more clearly written, but also got to the very core of the research and its implications for policy.

It is not easy saying farewell to someone who has been such a fabulous colleague and friend. As Meredith herself pointed out on more than one occasion, "One of the most visible outputs of a research organisation is its contribution to the literature". So it was fitting that Institute staff gathered in the library, surrounded by the physical proof of her work, to bid her farewell.

There were many speeches, but one memorable line, from Ruth Weston sums up our feelings. "Thanks for teaching us to write well and to be clear."