

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

HARRY MCGURK

The Honourable Warwick Smith, Federal Member of Parliament for the electorate of Bass, Tasmania, was appointed Minister for Family Services in September 1997. On Monday 9 February 1998, Mr Smith paid his first visit as Minister to the Institute.

The Minister spent the first part of his visit in discussion with the Director about the development of the Institute's research and information programs. Later in the morning he talked to the staff about his appreciation for the work of the Institute and its role, through that work, in contributing to the wellbeing of Australian families.

Later the same week, on Friday 13 February, there was a meeting of the Board of Management of the Institute, the first to be attended by Dr Sarah Kennedy (Melbourne) and Mrs Susan Bastick (Sydney) whose recent appointments to the Board had been confirmed by the Minister during his visit. Dr Kennedy is a General Practitioner with a particular interest in the health and development of young children. Mrs Bastick, who trained as a lawyer, was formerly President of the Australian Family Association and has a keen interest in family policy.

The Presiding Member of the Board, Ms Ann Sherry, welcomed Dr Kennedy and Mrs Bastick to their first meeting of the Board and looked forward to their contribution to the work and general direction of the Institute.

At the beginning of the year Dr David de Vaus returned to his position as Associate Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University from which he had been seconded for three years to work at the Institute as Research Manager. He was farewelled by the staff at an Institute function on 18 December 1997.

David made a significant contribution to the work of the Institute. The effective manner in which he oversaw the implementation of a complex research agenda, having previously played a key role in the development of the program, is acknowledged and appreciated.

Dr Trevor Batrouney joined the Institute as Acting Research Manager in January 1998. Trevor had previously been Assistant Director of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research prior to its being closed in November 1996. Immediately before joining the Institute he had been working as a research consultant. Trevor will remain at the Institute pending a permanent appointment of a Research Manager later in the year.

The Institute's research program operates on a three-year cycle and most projects from the current program will be

completed by mid-1998. Planning is underway towards the development of a new program and, in addition to in-house deliberations, involves the Institute in dialogue with stakeholders in Commonwealth and State governments across a range of departments concerned with family policy.

The structure of the new research program will have some continuity with the present program in that it will have a life course perspective and encompass projects in the broad, overlapping areas of family formation, dissolution and re-formation; parenting and child rearing; and family demography. A number of new projects within these broad areas are being developed and will be described in subsequent issues of *Family Matters*. It is planned to have the new program ready for approval by the Board at its Winter 1998 meeting, and to begin its implementation immediately thereafter.



Ms Ann Sherry, Presiding Member of the Institute's Board, and the Hon. Warwick Smith, Federal Minister for Family Services, visit the Institute in February 1998.

With a new Minister, new Board members appointed and others to be appointed soon, and a new research program being developed, the Board of Management of the Institute, at its meeting in February, decided that the time was right to review the Institute's Corporate Plan. Accordingly, a working party of the Board has been appointed to oversee the process. The first activity of the working party will be to organise a workshop at which members of the Board and senior staff of the Institute, along with representatives from a range of government departments and from the office of the Minister of Family Services, will exchange ideas over future directions for the Institute. These deliberations will inform the drafting of a new Corporate Plan for presentation to the Board for its approval later in the year. A report of the workshop will appear in a later issue of *Family Matters*.

After many years of advocacy, by the Institute and others, of the need for a Australian investigation of the long-term influences of participation in early childhood day care on the development of children, towards the end of 1997 the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services invited proposals, by selective competitive tender, for the conduct of a feasibility study for a longitudinal investigation of the effects of exposure to non-parental day care during infancy and early child care on the subsequent social and emotional health and wellbeing of the children involved.

In the course of the tendering process the Institute formed a partnership with the Consortium of Early Childhood Research and, early in 1998, the contract for the feasibility study was awarded to the partnership. Since then the Consortium – a grouping of early childhood academic teaching and research staff from Macquarie University, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Melbourne – and the Institute have been working together on the development of the feasibility study, the report on which was submitted to the Department at the end of March. A draft review of the research literature on the effects of non-parental care on children's development has also been submitted.

The award of this contract is a significant first step towards understanding the contributions, positive or negative, which non-parental child care makes to the development of Australian children. Although there is a considerable body of prior research on the topic, very little has been carried out in Australia, and there have been no large scale Australian prospective longitudinal projects. None of the overseas research is definitive and most of the recent work has been driven by a narrowly focused concern with possibly harmful effects of early non-parental care on infant-mother attachment.

Moreover, much of the earlier research has tended to treat child care as a relatively context free, categorical variable whereby children experience this or that amount of child care, of this or that quality, of this or that duration, at this or that point in the child's life. The work of the partnership is based on a more complex conception of child care, wherein the importance lies not in such parcels of care but in children's care careers, and the embeddedness of care careers in family, neighbourhood and the larger social ecology. Reports on the feasibility study will appear in subsequent issues of *Family Matters*.

Harry McGurk