

# “Fostering Change”: The National Foster Care Conference 2007

Dr Mel Irenyi

In October 2007, the Australian Foster Care Association Inc. (AFCA) held their annual National Foster Care Conference in the Docklands precinct of Melbourne. The conference was an exciting three days of exchanging ideas and celebrating the theme “Fostering Change”.

Dr Mel Irenyi, from the Clearinghouse, attended the conference and presented a paper at the conference titled, “Child Maltreatment in Organisations: Risk Management and Strategies for Prevention”, which is based on Child Abuse Prevention Issues paper no. 25 (available from [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues25/issues25.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues25/issues25.html)).

Foster carers, representatives of agencies and government departments, child protection workers, researchers and students from around Australia made up the list of more than 400 delegates. The delegates made the most of the opportunity to hear top-level speakers on a range of topics. Among the many keynote speakers were:

- Professor Dorothy Scott, Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, and Patron of AFCA;
- Dr Jenn McIntosh, clinical child and family psychologist specialising in attachment and bonding; and
- Khoa Do, a film director, screenwriter and teacher who arrived in Australia as a refugee, was young Australian of the Year in 2005, and is active in speaking out on youth issues, motivation and inspiration.

The delegates were also able to choose from an abundance of workshops conducted over the weekend. Workshop topics included carer recruitment and retention; developing optimistic thinking skills and resilience in children in care; and predictors of placement stability.

Realistic financial support for carers was a continuing theme throughout the conference and was a core issue identified in the National Policy Workshop conducted by AFCA president, Bev Orr. Other issues identified in the National Policy Workshop included uncertainty around the impact on foster carers of “welfare-to-work” legislation and the over-representation of Indigenous children in

out-of-home care. The theme of financial support for carers was continued by Marilyn McHugh, Research Scholar at the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre. In 2002, Marilyn reported on her research into the direct and indirect costs to carers of fostering. At the conference in 2007, she outlined the states’ responses in a talk titled, “In or Out of Step: The States’ Response to the Foster Care Estimates”.

Delegates heard that state responses had varied markedly. The smallest percentage rise in the weekly subsidy was 11% for a child aged 0–3 years in New South Wales (from \$174 to \$193). The largest percentage increase in the weekly subsidy was 144% (from \$84 to \$185) for a child aged 0–1 years in Queensland, bringing them in line with the 2007 Foster Care Estimate of \$186 per week for a child aged 0–1 years. The state responses resulted in more comparative subsidies across states and territories, but differences are still apparent. Marilyn stated the research showed four important rationales for a National Framework of Carer Payments. These were:

- that the adequacy and uniform equity of carer payments would be ensured;
- that adequate and equitable payments could assist with recruitment and retention of carers;
- carers would be less likely to be forced to meet care-related expenses out of their own pocket; and
- the quality of foster care may potentially be improved by the adequate and equitable reimbursement of carers.

A particular conference highlight was the screening of segments from a DVD created by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA). The DVD featured Indigenous children speaking about the meaning the Aboriginal flag has for them and messages they would give to other Indigenous children. Other workshops also addressed issues related to Indigenous children in out-of-home care, which was a recurrent theme throughout the conference. Some of the other workshop topics included improving educational outcomes for Indigenous children and youth in care; and support for non-Indigenous carers of Indigenous

children in care. These built on a keynote address by Muriel Bamblett, the Chief Executive Officer of VACCA. Also of note was a moving panel session with Indigenous natural parents of children in care. The panel discussed culture, beliefs and working together towards the best outcomes for children and young people.

### National Recognition Awards

The conference was an opportunity to exchange ideas and information about foster care and to develop networks. But it was also

a chance to celebrate excellence in foster care. At the conference dinner, 44 people were acknowledged with National Recognition Awards. The awards commended outstanding service to foster care and were based on criteria that included a minimum of 20 years of fostering, and certification from foster care agencies. The 44 award recipients had between them accumulated a total of 656 years of fostering. Conference organisers made particular note of Victoria's Marg and Joe Pawsey, who have fostered for 44 years.

At the time of writing [Dr Mel Irenyi](#) was a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

## Guidelines for contributors to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse's *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter*

The goal of the *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* is to promote the exchange of information and ideas and encourage scholarly debate of child maltreatment and child protection research, policy and practice issues.

Appropriate topics for contributions include:

- child maltreatment and child protection research, policy and practice issues;
- education and training issues;
- program profiles;
- notices about upcoming conferences, workshops, events; and
- book reviews, pointers to new publications, online papers, resources/links, websites, and so on.

### Author instructions

The *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* is published bi-annually in February and August. Contributions must be submitted four months in advance of publication to allow for review, revision, typesetting and printing timelines.

The average length of contributions is 1000–1500 words, but may be as short as 300–500 words. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of a piece, contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse to discuss your submission.

Every *Newsletter* comprises at least one major contribution (up to 3000 words). If you would like to submit a major contribution, please contact the National Child Protection Clearinghouse prior to submission.

Acceptance of all material is subject to a review process. Consideration will be given as to whether articles are

relevant, clearly written, jargon-free and accessible. Consideration will also be given to the following criteria: timeliness of article; significance of the topic; factual accuracy; clear presentation and logical organisation of material; conclusions substantiated by convincing analytical argument; argument supported by references; quality and balance of the argument or information presented; and balance and relevance of any policy implications drawn.

All submissions must be presented in 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, and have a title, an author and the author's affiliation. References should be consistent with the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th edition). Illustrations, diagrams, and so on should be submitted electronically in JPEG, TIF or EPS format. To enable publications to be published in both print and electronic format, the use of footnotes is not permitted.

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