

## **Editorial: *United We Stand?***

The national conference where Practice Reflexions was launched a year ago in Freemantle, Western Australia was, for the first time ever, jointly sponsored by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the Australian Institute of Welfare and Community Workers (AIWCW), the Australian Association for Social Work and Welfare Education (AASWWE), and the Society for Professional Social Workers (SPSW). The conference theme: UNITED WE STAND was chosen to assert the importance of a diverse and at times conflicted professional practice terrain. The intention was to focus on commonalities, rather than differences in order to maximise benefits for the membership of all four professional bodies, and more importantly, in the shared pursuit of social justice (Lonne 2006). Any call to unite presupposes a state of disunity, assumes that disparate entities will individually and collectively gain by acting supportively and aligning more closely together, and presumes that some measure of convergence and alliance is possible.

The articles contained in this edition of Practice Reflexions, some of which were presented at the conference, demonstrate that no matter how disputed the practice approach, or the professional identity, engaging with change to bring about social, political and economic justice for all sits at the core of social, welfare and community work. The authors draw variously on the themes of unity, diversity, change and social justice in offering their reflexions on their own and others' practice experiences and research findings in the professional field and policy context of human services.

Ian Murray's paper closely pursues the concerns of the conference theme by proposing the organisation of an overarching professional body as a site for change towards greater unity. He reflects on the possibility of forming an umbrella organisation for the entire community services sector as a way to address the oversight of the many blurred roles in health and community services, and the resultant neglect, by governments and existing professional organisations, of many professionals. Murray also proposes Negative Licensing as a way to avoid the problem of increasing regulation. Paul O'Neal and Winsome Roberts are also concerned with the effects of increasing regulation, and offer their reflexions on the social control effects of anti-smoking legislation. O'Neal and Roberts make the observation that anti-smoking policies and laws have acted to increase the regulation and imposition of government in the lives of socially and economically disadvantaged individuals and groups, creating challenges for social and community welfare workers who are confronted with imposing anti-smoking regulations on vulnerable client groups in institutional settings.

Philip Mendes is also concerned with the ill-considered consequences of regulatory policies for clients in regard to addictive substances. He argues that throughout the Howard government era there was an escalated influence exerted by prohibitionist lobbyists groups over Australian illicit drugs policy and funding, even though little inquiry was made into the background and political interests of these individuals and groups, or the credibility of their claims, particularly in relation to zero-tolerance.

Intended and unintended effects of social policy at the practice level are also central to Olga Bursian's article. Based on her PhD research, Bursian analyses practice approaches and policies that contributed to positive settlement experiences for

migrants to Australia during the mid–1970s to late–1990s. She found that migrant women in Melbourne not only benefited personally and socially from their contact with a range of public services as well as multicultural programs, but were also enabled to become key contributors as engaged citizens in the development of a ‘vibrant and diverse civil society’. In a similar vein, Virginia Mangazva, a Masters student at Curtin University, shares her observations and experiences as a community development worker with newly arrived refugees to Australia. Mangazva reflects that the most effective interventions often result from flexible, integrated and diverse practice approaches, such as a combination of individual psychological interventions with broader community development initiatives.

The theme of strength in unity manifests in Mark Furlong’s article as social connectedness. Furlong employs the concept of unity at the micro practice level by asserting the importance of practitioners focussing on building service users’ skills in interconnectedness and relatedness. He proposes that caseworkers have perhaps over attended to the autonomous self at the expense of the relational self, suggesting that service users who are socially connected and interdependent achieve better health and well–being outcomes. Lynda Campbell reviews a recently published text explicitly driven by this aim, ‘Good Practice in Child Protection’ co-authored by Tilbury, Osmond, Wilson and Clark, while Jan Richardson reviews Louis Nowra’s book ‘Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men’s violence against women and children’. This is a particularly pertinent and current topic brought to the fore by the Howard Government’s response to the welfare of children in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory following the release of the ‘The Little Children are Sacred’ report.

In conclusion, to return to the conference title: ‘United We Stand’ – which might be described as forming the ‘umbrella’ theme for this edition of Practice Reflexions – expression of the need to unite assumes a hostile context, whether political, social, cultural, religious, or economic. And, although the articles here are diverse in approach and topic, they are all drawn together by the common theme of recognising the need to form a locus, whether conceptual or material, transient or more permanent, for uniting against and addressing the challenges, and often unintended hostilities, faced by practitioners and, particularly service users in the shared pursuit of social justice for all.

## References

*Norma Parker Address at the United We Stand Conference*, by Dr Bob Lonne, AASW national president. 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2006.

<http://www.aasw.asn.au/adobe/news/conferences/NormaParkerAddress-United%20We%20Stand06V4.pdf> accessed 5<sup>th</sup> November 2007

Northern Territory Government (2007) ‘Little Children are Sacred’ Government Printers, Darwin.

*Karen Crinall lectures in Social and Community Welfare and Human Services Management at Monash University.*