

WA SOCIAL WORK NEWS

August 2003

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

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Tending the Lawn

The grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence. Fences have nothing to do with it.

The grass is greener where it is watered. So, when crossing fences, carry water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be.

Robert Fulghum. It as on fire when I lay down on it. Villard books.

Online Version

An online version of this newsletter can be found at
<http://socprofsocwkr.highway1.com.au>

Welcome to the first issue of *WA Social Work News*, the newsletter of the Society of Professional Social Workers (Inc).

The Society was established in June 2003 as a legal entity in accordance with West Australian law, as an organisation incorporated under WA's *Association Incorporation Act 1987*.

Many social workers will probably be familiar already with this legislation, as it is widely used to provide the legal framework, rules and principles for the operation of organisations and community based groups involving a diverse range of objects, such as:

- a religious, educational, charitable or benevolent purpose;
- promoting or encouraging literature, science or the arts;
- the purpose of sport, recreation or amusement;
- establishing, carrying on, or improving a community, social or cultural centre, or promoting the interests of a local community;
- for political purposes; or
- any other purpose approved by the Commissioner.

This legal framework was adopted to establish the Society as an incorporated association, as it permits the Society, subject to its rules of association and other provisions of the Act, to have the legal power to operate as fully accountable body, able to undertake activities such as, being able to legally acquire, hold, deal with, and dispose of any real or personal property, open and operate bank accounts, invest its money in any security in which trust moneys may be invested, borrow money on such terms and conditions as the association thinks fit and enter into any other contract it considers necessary or desirable.

(Further information about incorporation can be found at the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection website - <http://www.docep.wa.gov.au>.)

The establishment of the Society represents an opportunity for an alternative model to represent the professional interests and aspirations of social workers by the creation of a totally State based and run organisation. It is not the intention of those who have formed the Society to engage in acrimonious and pointless debate about the perceived and demonstrated shortcomings of the operation of the AASW.

Our goal is focussed on what can be achieved in the future, by engaging a membership of committed social workers interested in work-

ing together to organise and conduct challenging CPE events, to advance the goals and visions of the profession of social work, to provide fellowship and mutual support and to engage in debate and speak out about the core social values and principles that produce a fairer society for which the social work profession stands.

It is important to acknowledge that in the short term the Society will be exclusively focussed on creating a viable, active and vibrant organisation which enjoys a broad membership and represents the interests of the profession throughout WA.

However, in the longer term, as the Society believes that the development and advancement of a national identity is vital, it will work to also establish an arrangement for there to be a national federation of social workers in this country.

Such an arrangement would operate through the creation of a legally distinct and separate social work organisation in each jurisdiction (ie the States and Territories), with another legally separate body (for example, the Federation of Australian Social Workers), which would be charged with performing a small number of specific and well defined tasks which could not be otherwise achieved by any of the jurisdiction based associations, such as international relations.

If a Federation is formed in the future it would be funded on a limited basis only as it would have a very small infrastructure. The management of organisational and financial matters, such as maintaining a membership register, undertaking CPE events and conferences would always be the sole responsibility of each respective State and Territory based organisation.

It is understood that there is already interest in a number of the other States about the development of a similar structure and arrangement as has occurred in WA with the establishment of the Society.

As membership of the Society is open to any suitably qualified social worker, anywhere in Australia, it is possible for a social worker in WA to be a member of the Society whilst also remaining a member of the AASW.

Whilst it is possible that some individuals may want to retain membership of both organisations, as there is no legal or organisational relationship between either the AASW or the Society, membership of

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one organisation does not enable a person to accrue or claim any of the benefits of the other.

In the coming months the Society will build up an active membership so that it can operate as a self supporting and independent organisation.

In the interim, until the first annual general meeting is held (it is anticipated that this will occur in 2004), an interim Committee of Management will manage the affairs of the Society.

Expressions of interests are being sought from social workers who would become members and be interested in supporting interest/consultative groups and working groups/subcommittees to provide a voice to advocate on behalf of the profession in areas such as:

- ✓ health;
- ✓ mental health;
- ✓ aged care;
- ✓ registration;
- ✓ private practice;
- ✓ forensic social work; and
- ✓ children and families.

Similarly, expressions of interest are also being sought from social workers who through their membership would be interested in being involved as a member of working group/subcommittee in other areas, including to:

- ✓ organise and facilitate continuing professional education activities; and
- ✓ develop, review and maintain ethical and professional standards.

I am aware that there are many West Australian social workers who have a wealth of experience gained through practice across a broad range of areas and organisational context.

I would urge you to consider whether you wish to become involved in establishing the Society through your participation as either a member or as a member of one of the working groups/subcommittees that are being established.

BRIAN WOOLLER
INTERIM PRESIDENT

**CONFLICT PLACES
THE MENTALLY ILL AT
RISK OF HARM**

Individuals with serious mental disorders have an increased chance of becoming victims of violence because their relationships with others are more likely to provoke conflict, according to a Penn State criminologist.

“The risk of victimization was found to be particularly strong when mental dysfunction was accompanied by illegal drug use,” says Dr. Eric Silver, assistant professor of crime, law and justice and sociology.

“People with serious mental disorders, particularly those experiencing delusional beliefs or hallucinations, or those with substance abuse disorders, tend to arouse negative responses from those around them, even among family members and friends. This is because persons with mental disorders often lack social graces while they engage in conduct that appears crude, bizarre or even threatening to others,” Silver notes.

Those around them frequently interpret their behaviour as offensive when it is not meant to be, and respond by taking control measures that may lead to arguments, and sometimes to violence, he adds. The situation may be exacerbated by the fact that threatened or actual violent encounters often cause mentally disordered people to be avoided or rejected by others. This reduces the odds that these individuals will enjoy the social buffer of capable, caring guardianship and places them at even more serious risk of confrontation and victimization.

“My study points to a critical need for persons interacting with the mentally ill to develop skills or competencies in dealing with them,” Silver adds. “Counselling services could teach managerial techniques to family members, friends, neighbours and even members of the

medical and criminal justice professions. The ultimate objective is to help families, caretakers and others to cope with the mentally disordered individual while at the same time avoiding conflicts with them that may lead to victimization."

Silver is author of the paper, "Mental disorder and violent victimization: The mediating role of Involvement in conflicted social relationships," which appeared in a recent issue of the journal *Criminology*. The Penn State researcher is one of the few criminologists whose ongoing research focuses on the victimization of the mentally ill.

Using the MacArthur Foundation's 1992-95 Violent Risk Assessment Study, Silver collected data from a survey group of 270 psychiatric patients discharged from the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pittsburgh. He also interviewed a sample of 477 family members, significant others, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, neighbours and professional staffers from the neighbourhoods into which the patients had been released.

Silver's analysis concentrated on the first 10 weeks after the release of each patient and tracked all records of hospital readmissions and criminal arrests.

To take part in the study, patients had to be diagnosed with one of the following types of major mental disorders: schizophrenia, depression, mania, psychosis, delusions, substance abuse disorder or personality disorder. "Deeds of violence committed by study participants included acts of battery that resulted in physical injury, sexual assaults, assaultive acts that involved the use of a weapon and threats made with a weapon in hand," Silver says.

"During the first 10 weeks, 7 percent of the subjects reported having been hit or beaten up; 3 percent reported having been forced to have sex; and 2 percent reported having been threatened or attack with a knife or gun," says Silver, a member of the National Science Foun-

ation's National Consortium on Violence Research and senior data analyst for the Violence Risk Assessment Study. He also is a research associate of Penn State's Population Research Institute.

Originally published in EurekaAlert 18 September 2002 <http://www.eurekaalert.org/pubnews.php>

Response to Jim Ife's Social Work Day Oration

Jim's elegant and erudite oration published in *The West Australian Social Worker* (June 2003) is timely in querying conventional and time honoured concepts and providing a route for the future. The *Society of Professional Social Workers (Inc)* is an ideal forum to debate this issue and other issues of currency.

Jim queries the notion of a social work 'identity', and properly argues that social work and social work education have, perhaps by default, been swept up by the gales of change which have rocked western societies and deeply affected the whole world.

People educated in social work are today found in a multiplicity of work and life roles, and practitioners are no longer characterised by the usual 'case work/community work' dialectic. Those who perceive themselves in a traditional role are bewildered, hurting and unsure what to do. Stress is rampant. Amongst other things we spectacularly lost the battle to prevent erstwhile specifically social work positions becoming generic. We must look for alternatives.

We live in a society where most social workers have never been so materially well off, yet are troubled by the apparent lack of wisdom and morality of our governments. The rise of fundamentalisms, sits uncomfortably with us and we are often fearful of the future. In the paper Jim develops a possible scenario which is relevant and profoundly disturbing.

Of identity Jim quotes Manuel Castells who posits three types, namely legitimised identity, resistance identity, and project identity.

Legitimised (professional) identity as practiced by a majority of our colleagues today is seen as conservative and outmoded.

Resistance identity provides a sense of solidarity but is considered essentially

transitory and of little lasting value.

It is project identity, ie the development and promotion of progressive creative and relevant solutions to problems which confront us professionally, which Jim feels is the way for the future. Jim suggests many of us would like to practice this way, but the current work environment precludes it. He feels that project work and identity can best be found in 'political parties, lobby groups and activist organisations'. He states:

"First, it requires people to move out of both a legitimising identity, where we are happy as competent professionals doing legitimated work, and out of a resistance identity where we know what we don't like and stand against it. We have to stop wasting our time complaining about John Howard and Philip Ruddock.

"Rather we need to be better at articulating what we do want. What it would be like to live in an Australia that that is really committed to human rights and social justice? What would it mean if the values of social work were genuinely implemented throughout society? What would world peace really look like? How would we want refugees to be treated in Australia?"

I would argue that we should expect social work to continue in *each* of these areas although the direction may be different, and that the categories are complementary. In legitimate social work lies the means to live, to feed clothe and house ourselves and our children, and to provide the means for our leisure and other activities. Here reside our history and epistemology informing our present and future practice, our means of accountability and practice standards, and our code of ethics. This does not preclude making these relevant to today's complex demands and future needs.

Resistance to things we do not like is no end in itself. I believe none the less that we must resist where necessary. We must work to change Howard and Ruddock et al when appropriate. Fear of the ballot box makes a big difference. Jim mentions some recent causes which were successfully resisted, and indeed he has been an outstanding performer himself! We cannot have solutions without problems.

Jim is right when he posits that the greatest identity for social workers is that of 'project' and that without it we have a poor future. Our training fits us to do this well. As social work graduates we have studied anthropology and sociology, politics, economics, community and group work, research methodology, good interpersonal skills and much more! If we are knowledgeable and clever we can cause

those in power to make desired changes, though it is often slow and disheartening. Within the profession in WA we are experiencing upheavals. Whilst the professional affairs of social workers in WA have been for many years in the hands of a freely elected and competent group of diverse practitioners, the model within which it worked became unworkable.

After the unprecedented action taken by that group, we are now in a position to heed words of the calibre of Jim's oration, and using our collective experience, look for imaginative visionary and resourceful ways to promote and support the social workers of today and tomorrow.

There is much hard work ahead, and like all human endeavour it will not be perfect. But, and this is the exciting bit - we can give it our best, free of illfitting constraints and with faith in the future!

PATTIE BENJAMIN

Questions and Answers

Answers are provided to some of the questions asked by social workers about the newly formed Society of Professional Social Workers (SPSW).

Q: Will the membership of the new SPSW include indemnity insurance?

A: This will be provided by Jardine Lloyd Thompson Pty Ltd. Cover and will be the same as available from the AASW.

Q: Will the SPSW be political in supporting social justice issues?

A: In a group representing a whole profession it is often difficult to take a representative stand on complex issues. An example was being able to give input to debate on abortion law reform in WA, because of the divergent views on the subject. Contact with ministers and alliances with other like minded agencies will be made and maintained.

Q: Social workers in some organisations have felt that their work was of little interest to the AASW. Will the new body be inclusive?

A: Yes. We would also like to extend our input to those who are not traditional social workers but have a BSW, eg lawyers, journalists, industrial workers etc and provide them with CPE and other needs.

Q: How will CPE be managed?

A: In the past we had a good working model which we would like to further develop.

Q: What about a Code of Ethics?

A: This is available on SPSW's web site and is easy to read, comprehensive, clear, workable and effective.

Q: How can the fees be so low?

A: All income made in Western Australia will be kept here and spent on providing services to members. There will be no capitation fees for items which are not relevant to professional workers in WA. Fees will remain lower as the Society will not have the overheads of a corporate central office.

Q: Who can be members?

A: We must be inclusive of all who have graduated and wish to maintain a vital and progressive association with colleagues no matter what their occupation. Students from accredited schools will be warmly welcome and respected for the significant and unique input they can have.

Q: What other services will the SPSW offer?

A: A structure similar to the Committee of Management of the former WA Branch will be used as an initial working model. We will be free to develop it as the membership wishes.

Submission to Select Committee

The Legislative Council has appointed a Select Committee to investigate the establishment of a Commissioner for Children. This is a very significant proposal and is likely to be widely supported by many social workers in this State.

The need for the establishment of this type of body has been recently been canvassed by Gordon inquiry. Similar bodies operate in a number of other jurisdictions, such as a Children's Ombudsman (Finland and State of Maine) and Children's Advocate (Norway)

The Society is canvassing input from social workers to enable it to make a submission to the Select Committee. The closing date for submissions is 1 September 2003. Social workers who could contribute to such a submission are invited to contact one of the Executive members.

Select Committee on Advocacy for Children (Appointment of a Commissioner for Children)

Terms of Reference

That a select committee of three members be appointed to inquire into and report on -

1. The appointment of a commissioner for children or the establishment of an independent office for children as the most appropriate means of establishing an advocate for children to enable better government for children and to ensure government and Parliament are aware of the needs of children.
2. The responsibilities and duties of such a commission or office. This investigation should include but need not be limited to an examination of:
 - developing an appropriate advocate for children in the heart of government;
 - legislative and policy impact statements for children;
 - an advocacy function for children;
 - coordination across government agencies affecting children;
 - ensuring that child participation is basic to the functioning of the commission/office and to the development of public policy;
 - developing and benchmarking a strategy for children;
 - investigating complaints and reporting on maladministration of government;
 - the physical and mental health of children, including the importance of sport and play in child development and litigious and industrial issues restricting these, the role of television, videos and computers, time spent in childcare, immunisation rates, services for disabled children;
 - research relevant to children and its relevance to the development of public policy;
 - the impact of the justice system on children;
 - the transport system and its relevance to children's needs;
 - the staffing and budget for this commission/office;
 - any other matters that impact on the good growth and development of young children; and
 - the impacts of government and industry policy on the wellbeing of children.
3. The committee has power to send for persons, papers and records and to travel from place to place.
4. The committee report to the House not later than 30 June 2004.