

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

The abortion debate has been raging in the media following the arrest of two medical practitioners who were charged with offences under the Criminal Code. The Criminal Code provides penalties for any person involved in the procuring of an abortion, even the woman herself. The penalties can amount to imprisonment with hard labour for 14 years or for the woman involved, imprisonment with hard labour for 7 years. Critically Section 201 of the Criminal Code stipulates that "any person who unlawfully supplies to, or procures for any person any thing whatever, knowing that it is intended to be unlawfully used to procure the miscarriage of a woman, whether she is or is not with child, is guilty of a misdemeanour and is liable to imprisonment with hard labour for 3 years".

This particular section of the Criminal Code, could conceivably apply to social work practice. Importantly this matter needs to be debated by our Branch and a clear position consistent with professional ethics and practice standards be arrived at. It would also seem that social workers working with women who are pregnant and attempting to make a decision about the future of their pregnancy, might be liable in civil law.

While members are covered by their professional indemnity policy, the extent of insurance cover will be impacted if an action is taken by a social worker that is clearly in contravention of the criminal law. At the last Committee of Management meeting it was decided that all Subcommittees be asked to discuss this issue and be prepared to come to a forum at which matters in relation to abortion could be aired with a view to a clear policy being formulated.

No matter what the outcome is from the Private Member's Bill or likely free vote in Parliament, there will be practice issues which need to be decided on on the basis of ethics and standards of practice. The issues we need to address in relation to social work principles are those about practice, not about personal moral views.

If any member has any view that they would like to put to the Branch at this point in the debate would they please contact any member of the Committee of Management or Convenor of a Subcommittee. Their names and contact numbers are listed in the February Edition of the Newsletter.

Members may also be interested in knowing that the WA Branch has instigated on behalf of the Association, registration with the Industrial Commission as an Industrial Agent. If there is no objection to the registration of the Association, it is anticipated that it will be registered within the next few weeks. This will enable the Association to be involved in the giving of industrial advice without being vulnerable to prosecution under current industrial legislation. It will also enable us to take a matter to the industrial commission if that was felt necessary. Shades of revisiting the past for those who will remember the days when the Association was registered as a trade union. The intention of registration is not, however, to revisit the possibility of the Association taking on a primary industrial relations role, but simply to allow with impunity, the Association's involvement when and where appropriate with industrial matters.

It is also important for members to know that the professional indemnity insurance policy coverage has been extended to 5 million dollars. This is to ensure that members have sufficient coverage to meet tender expectations of most organisations involved in tendering out work.

BRIAN WOOLLER

New Members

Leah Bonson (Family & Children's Services)
Virginia Frost (Water Corporation)
Paul Hatton (SECCA)
Yukari Kojima (Dept Immigration & Multicultural Affairs)
Annette Sangster (Student Associate)
Julie Sparrow (Communicare)

Letters

Mr Robert Fisher
Director General
Family and Children's Service

Dear Bob

It has been brought to the notice of our Association that your Department has advertised a number of Team Leader positions in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions. The Karratha, Newman, Marble Bar and South Hedland positions, when advertised initially, contained under the heading "Qualifications and Experience", "A Tertiary Qualification in Social Work or Psychology and eligibility for full registration with the AASW or the Psychologist Registration Board". The positions when advertised in the West Australian on the 10 January 1998, included as a desirable criteria "possession of a relevant tertiary qualification".

This gives us concern on a number of counts. The first of these is the quite clear intent to reduce the professionalism necessary to these positions and only require a "relevant" tertiary qualification, whatever that might be. For some time our Association has supported workers within your organisation on their professionalism and standards of service delivery. A decision like this downgrades the position and reduces any opportunity to enhance either professional development or professional competence within your Department's area of service delivery.

Secondly, the Team Leader position is critical within the structure of your organisation, and there would now appear to be differential requirements according to geographic location. The implication here is that there is preparedness to accept a less than ideal situation in remote areas.

Thirdly, it is of concern that two advertisements of the same positions can be in circulation with different qualification requirements. This surely compromises the process of selection.

It is hoped that your Department will continue to strive for excellence and ensure that not only the best standards of practice are adhered to, but that the most appropriate qualifications are maintained and that standards remain universal across the state.

Yours sincerely

Brian Wooller
Branch President
30 January 1998

Mr Brian Wooller
President

Dear Brian

You wrote to the Director General of this department on 30 January 1998 expressing your concern about recently published advertisements for Team Leader positions in the Kimberley and Pilbara. As the Executive Director responsible for Country Services, I am responding to your letter on behalf of the Director General Mr Fisher.

I must firstly express disappointment in the tone of your letter and the insulting suggestions of our "intent to reduce the professionalisation necessary to these positions". It is our intention to recruit the best possible

people for all these positions and the advertisements were aimed at attracting as wide a field as possible in the circumstances for the selection process. The positions are not social worker or psychologist specific and it may be that people with other relevant qualifications and experiences are available for consideration.

When the positions were initially advertised with the restricted qualifications stated as essential, this was an error, which was rectified with the subsequent advertisement listing "possession of a relevant tertiary qualification" as a desirable criterion. Applicants who applied under the first advertisement were contacted and advised that their application for the position was received despite the second advertisement. The selection process will in no way be compromised as suggested in your letter.

Brian, your second point referring to "differential requirements according to geographic location" amazes me. I would have thought that you would have been aware that in some remote locations in the Kimberley and Pilbara areas, specific needs exist and special ways of working to address these needs are required. This does not mean a lowering of standards or an acceptance of anything less than the best possible situation, and as I am responsible for Country Services Delivery throughout the state, I must say I am very disappointed that you would make this suggestion.

Your concluding statement that you hope this department will continue to strive for excellence, and that standards remain universal across the state need not be said, as I believe you are already aware of the efforts we have made, and continue to make to improve and provide excellent services to families and children right across the state.

Brian, if you have any further concerns of this nature, I would be grateful if you will contact me to provide your advice or alternatively enable me to clarify the situation for your benefit.

Yours sincerely

Gary Bowler
Executive Director, Country Services
Family and Children's Services
9 February 1998

Mr Gary Bowler
Executive Director, Country Services
Family and Children's Services

Dear Gary

In response to your letter of the 9 February 1998, I am sorry that you felt the tone of my letter to you of the 30 January 1998 was insulting. The matter was brought to our attention by a social worker and as is appropriate under the circumstances outlined, I wrote to the Director General.

The fact that the advertisement was in the first instance an error, does not alter two important points. The first of these is that to broaden the qualifications required and move them from being essential to desirable is quite clearly a process of de-professionalisation. Secondly, I would have thought that to alter an advertisement offering a position with one set of qualifications to a second set of qualifications, whilst still accepting the applications under the first advertisement, impinges on the selection process.

It is the concern of our Association that there would seem to be a clear policy of de-professionalisation. This is the issue central to the concerns

of the profession and this is why the matter was brought to your attention.

I am well aware of the difficulties of recruitment, particularly in remote areas, but it is my understanding that there were a number of applications that met the first advertisement's criteria. Our Association would contend that the specificity of professional qualifications defines the position as professional. The requirement of a generalised qualification as a desirable, but not an essential requirement, designates the position as potentially not professional.

In no way was the letter intended to be insulting, but it was intended to make the points which you have responded to.

It may be of interest for you to know that the Association has applied for registration as an Industrial Agent under the current industrial laws in Western Australia.

Yours sincerely

Brian Wooller
Branch President
24 February 1998

Mr Brian Wooller
WA Branch President

Dear Mr Wooller

Thank you for your correspondence regarding the restructure of the Department of Family and Children's Services.

This restructure, which was initiated by the Department's Director General, has led to the adoption of more streamlined management structures, more flexible approaches to service delivery and the redirection of some 50 more staff into service delivery roles.

If your Association would like to be briefed on the new structure I would suggest you approach the Director General, Mr Robert Fisher, in this regard either by writing to him at 189 Royal Street, East Perth 6004 or by calling on 9222 2555.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely

Richard Court MLA
Premier
2 February 1998

The Editor
The West Australian

Dear Editor

The abortion debate clearly highlights the inability of legislators to both review and update laws in accordance with social mores and norms of the day.

To let a situation such as we are observing over the abortion issue, to develop to the point it has, is essentially a dereliction of duty on the part of our legislators. This is not the first time, nor will it necessarily be the last time, that legislators have been caught on the hop. The current laws in relation to abortion have been on the statute books for some time. It is inexcusable that laws are allowed to remain as sleeping laws to be resurrected and then cause the pain, chaos and concern that we have seen

on this occasion.

It is the responsibility of the legislators to debate this issue and to produce laws that are both moral, ethical, workable and consistent with the world in which we live. It is inexcusable for any politician to duck the issue as it is clearly their job to legislate on matters such as this.

Yours sincerely

Brian Wooller
Branch President
13 February 1998

Request for Information and Comment

The WA Branch has received the following correspondence from Janet Whelan, Convenor, Task Group on Matters Relating to Relinquishment and Adoption

You will be aware from discussions at recent Board meetings of concerns that have been expressed to the AASW by relinquishing mothers about the role of social work in the adoption process. These concerns have included difficulties in accessing information about past practices and the lack of acknowledgement and resolution of continuing grief over the loss of children who were adopted.

A small working group from the Board has been considering how we, as the professional body representing social workers, might best respond to the issues that have been raised. The strategies we have discussed include the following:

- Supporting the implementation of National Principles in Adoption. We understand that these principles have been adopted by the council of Community Services Ministers; however, we have not yet determined the extent to which they have been implemented in the states and territories.
- Supporting amendments to legislation (where this has not already been achieved) which would allow relinquishing mothers access to identifying information about adult adoptees.
- Supporting self-help groups and assisting them to obtain adequate levels of funding.
- Advocating for and supporting counselling services in both the public and non-government sectors. Counselling services need to be accessible, to offer choices (as some relinquishing mothers will prefer to use a service separate from the agency that arranged her child's adoption), and to provide for assistance in dealing with profound and continuing grief.
- Establishing dialogue at a local level between social workers and relinquishing mothers in order to promote the process of understanding and reconciliation.

- Encouraging research and providing opportunities for student placements in agencies which offer services to relinquishing mothers and other parties to adoption in order to extend professional understanding of and sensitivity to issues relating to relinquishment and adoption.

As adoption legislation and the provision of adoption services is a responsibility for the states and territories in Australia, it is necessary for us to seek your assistance. We would like to be in a position to advise interested persons who contact the Association about the status of these issues around Australia and of any initiatives of social workers to support relinquishing mothers in their search for information and reconciliation of their grief.

It would greatly assist the working group if you could refer this letter to interested members of your Branch and provide us with local information and comment on the matters listed above by 31 March. We would also appreciate suggestions about other ways in which the Association might respond.

Information and comments can be forwarded to Janet Whelan C/- AASW Tasmania Branch, PO Box 344, Moonah Tasmania 7009 or to Pattie Benjamin, Vice President (Social Policy), AASW WA Branch, PO Box 198 West Perth 6872.

Recent Graduates

The Recent Graduates Subcommittee will be meeting next at 7.30 pm on Wednesday 11 March 1998 at the Northbridge Hotel, Brisbane Street, North Perth.

At this meeting we plan to consider organising a social function for all recent graduates around the time of graduation. If you have any ideas about this or would like to come along and join the meeting, you will be most welcome.

We would like to thank Liz Retamal for coming to the February meeting - we all came away with a much better understanding of the Continuing Professional Education Program.

For further information about the Recent Graduates Committee contact Diane Smith on 9295 4453.

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CPE EVENTS

SHORT-TERM INTERVENTION WITH FAMILIES

ALDO GURGONE

TUESDAY 17 MARCH 1998, 9.00 AM - 5.00 PM

Cost: AASW members \$80, non members \$100, students/unwaged \$50

Places are still available in this workshop. For further details and registration form contact Liz Retamal on 08 9443 2934 (business hours).

WOMEN AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

TUESDAY 26 MAY 1998, 2.00 - 5.00 PM

A participative workshop presented by Paddy Glasgow, Senior Counsellor, Perth Women's Centre.

In this experiential workshop Paddy will give information regarding the special needs of women seeking treatment for substance abuse. She will further illustrate how the recognition and meeting of these needs encourages them to battle their habits/addictions and to adopt a healthier lifestyle. She will also outline and demonstrate her methods of treatment, with special emphasis on their relevance to women. The style of the workshop is very much learning by doing.

Further details and registration form will be circulated with the May edition of *The West Australian Social Worker*.

Questions About Suicide Seminar

For those who attended this seminar with Professor Bryan Tanney on Tuesday 24 February, Professor Tanney has provided the following information.

Bibliotherapy of suicide reference. For empowering clients at risk of suicidal acts, have them read:

Choosing to live: how to defeat suicide through cognitive therapy. Ellis, TE and Newman, CF. New Harbinger Publications, 1996, Oakland, CA.

Suicide: the forever decision. Quinnett, Paul.