

Launch of National Child Protection Week 2006

I would like to welcome you all here to celebrate the launch of NCPW 2006.

It is a particularly apposite time to reflect on the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal people, and their troubled journey up till now. They have arrived at this time after wave upon wave of change which has been overwhelming, all the more so for having replaced a culture focused on continuity and where change happened very slowly and was incorporated in the culture. I thank the Ngunnawal people for the opportunity we all have to live and work and enjoy and appreciate this special place.

Thank you Minister Gallagher for making yourself available, in your very busy schedule, to Launch NCPW again this year. I know just how deeply you are committed to children. I know from your record of achievement for children as Minister, that your resolve is to achieve real and lasting improvements in the lives of all ACT children in ways which will enable them all to enjoy their childhoods and go on to live healthier, more fulfilling adult lives.

Within this vision, child abuse and neglect persist as malign disease processes, diseases which can be fatal, but have their major effects by crippling so many of our children in an emotional sense- the most pervasive and persisting form of damage that children can suffer. This social illness is now the biggest health and wellbeing threat to our children.

It is a far greater threat to our children than more traditional illnesses, such as meningitis. However, “traditional” diseases far more readily attract prompt responses and effective action. I am not saying that this should stop. It is a great delight to me as a doctor to see the continuing improvement in treatment- and far more importantly the prevention- of these terrible diseases.

My concern is that child abuse and neglect is far more insidious in its evolution and far more uncomfortable in the response it engenders. By the time it is acknowledged, the vast majority of children have been afflicted for years- and the damage is embedded in their function as adults.

The abused and neglected children we are more likely to notice are the angry young people who have a direct impact on our lives and comfort.

The equally large number of withdrawn, depressed and self-blaming young people are more easily overlooked.

Then there is the huge number of abused children who grow into caring, achieving adults, but at a huge emotional cost. These can be the strong quiet people, or the really funny, life-of-the party people who, even when very old and venerable, can still weep with grief recalling the abusive and neglectful experiences of their childhood.

Across Australia, from June 2003 to June 2004, we recognised and reported some 219,000 of these children (10% up on the previous year)- and we know this is an underestimate- the tip of the iceberg.

In the ACT, a city of some 300,000 people, the 2004-5 notifications were more than double those of the previous year- more than 8,000 reports and 343 children placed in care, compared with 277 in care the previous year.

Why does it happen and what does it mean?

Firstly I believe the increase in ACT is at least in part due to the major campaign to get mandated reporters to take their responsibilities seriously. This means more of the children who should be noticed are being noticed.

Secondly, the impact of drug and alcohol use is continuing to have more children than previously growing up in very unsafe and unpredictable homes- a very bad environment for growing brains. Learning about early brain development and the impact of trauma on this is one of the most critical parts of our new knowledge of children and their critical needs.

As I have said already this year, and many times before, there is far more that is “sad” than “bad” about child abuse. The rate of change in our daily lives is frenetic. We are losing touch with our families, our friends and our neighbours- even with our colleagues at work. The responsibility for rearing children is becoming an isolating and undervalued task.

Human beings are social beings- this doesn't mean we need to live in communes, but it does mean that we need to be connected, to have others around to help us, to celebrate with us and even to criticise- it all contributes to us staying afloat and keeping connected.

I read in “Civilisation” or a similar book of a TV evolution program, the comment “when a species loses its capacity to nurture its young, the species perishes”. On my bad days, I feel we are getting perilously close to this point- and then I meet a delighted family with young children- and friends and neighbours and I gain heart.

The NAPCAN focus on Child friendly Australia and Child friendly communities is all about building and sustaining these critical connections. Each of us, left to ourselves, can't do much- though every

little does help. The easier part of “child friendly”- Smiling and laughing with passing babies, complimenting the proud parents and grandparents, connecting with the children in your life all helps enormously. But imagine it multiplied 300,000 times, with every Canberran believing that he or she has a shared responsibility for all of our children- then the ACT would be a wonderful caring place for all of us to be part of.

Even in the hard world of finance and development, caring and contributing communities has been proven to be the way to go.

Some of us were privileged to hear Prof James Heckman, Nobel Laureate and economist, speak earlier this year.

He said many memorable and convincing things. A few of them were

- Learning begets learning. The earlier the seed is planted and watered, the faster and larger it grows.
- If we invest early enough we can affect both cognitive and socio-emotional abilities.
- It is easier to measure cognitive achievements than socio-emotional ones, but in the long-term it is the socio-emotional capabilities which most influence the final outcome for each child.

His advice was to invest early, generously and keep investing in ensuring infants and young children developed both cognitive and socio-emotional skills. For those interested in the money aspects of investing, the gains by developing healthier, competent adults are in the order of 12% to 17%.

NAPCAN believes that the only way we can achieve this and stop abuse and neglect is for the community to take seriously its responsibility to rear its young and to provide a caring supportive community for this to happen.

Some aspects of child friendly require more thought. Firstly, even when children are included in major planning for services and policies, we all revert to deciding for them what we genuinely believe is best for them. Unfortunately this process is almost always guided by what we want to achieve and the consideration is more to persuade the children and their carers that it is the best solution.

There is also the increasing tendency to overload even very small children with complex consultation and consent processes when these are far beyond their developmental capabilities and become tokenistic. Along with this is the practice of using child safety- from accident and abuse- as an excuse for inaction, rather than as a challenge for lateral thinking and creative solutions. It was great that the children were able to join their fathers on the grounds at the recent Raiders match.

The development of the Children's Plan for the ACT is probably the Territory's most important achievement in terms of recognising children. Thank you Minister for your commitment in achieving this. It has had some influence on policies and decisions, but there is still a long way to go. Of itself, it is still subject to adults' assessment of its effectiveness. The complementary service, to promote the voice and needs and opinions of children- The Commissioner for Children- has still to be appointed. It is very disappointing that so much time has already passed without accomplishing this. At the same time, it is important to take time and thought to determine just how the position might be used most effectively for children. What the position could achieve with an under-resourced Commissioner could well be worse than no Commissioner, because the position would be unable to fulfil the children's clearly articulated requirements of this most important person

A current concern in ACT is the number of recent infant deaths in which the babies were sleeping in unsafe environments. Most parents knew what should be done, but for a variety of reasons, did not do it. NAPCAN, with advice from SIDS & KIDS and Kidsafe, has developed a personalised, attractive wall chart, with a space for the baby's name, and with the safe sleeping messages, to hang above the cot and be a constant reminder of safety. Because many parents worry about their baby getting too cold, a thermometer is on the chart and suggestions are given about the amounts of clothing and blankets to keep the baby comfortable. Looking at the thermometer is another reminder of safe sleeping. We hope families will find it useful. We are using this Launch to introduce this tool, which will be made available to every baby born in ACT.

I have spoken far too long- there is our prize winning Lyneham choir to enjoy- and then the special NAPCAN cake to cut. This cake is to introduce and celebrate our new Child Friendly Australia logo, designed to reinforce that NAPCAN retains its commitment to prevent child abuse and neglect, whilst stressing that the only effective way to achieve this is by redeveloping our communities- neighbourhood, church, sporting and work- to really take on the responsibility of growing the healthiest, most loved and respected children that they can possibly be.