

## The Sixth Winston S. Rickards Memorial Oration

Monday 16 March 2015 - 7.30 pm — Ella Latham Theatre — Royal Children's Hospital

# "HEARING THE VOICE OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN"

Good evening everyone and thank you for the invitation and honour to deliver the Sixth Winston Rickards Memorial Oration.

Before I commence, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and particularly any of those elders, who might be present today. In particular I wish to acknowledge the special contribution of Dr Alf Bamblett (1944-2015) who died last weekend.

A Yorta Yorta/ Wiradjuri man, Dr Alf Bamblett was the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited (VACSAL). In 1984 along with others, he was instrumental in establishing VACSAL. An Elder and Leader within the Victorian Aboriginal Community Uncle Alf worked with boundless energy for over forty years driving key policy, placing an Aboriginal voice at the forefront of government decisions and strengthening the Aboriginal sector.

Dr Bamblett was the first ATSIC Commissioner elected for Victoria in 1992. While Commissioner he helped prepare a response to the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and played an integral role in negotiating the funding for programs to address the Commission's 339 recommendations. In doing so he became the first Aboriginal man from Victoria to present to the Federal Cabinet. He played a key role in the development and implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement with a particular passion for the rights of young Aboriginal people in the justice system. He was also a Director of VACCA and Executive member of SNAICC advocating for equality and services for Aboriginal children.

Uncle Alf was recognised by his community and by the broader Victorian population over his many years of service. To sight but a few of these; in 1994 he was named Victorian Aboriginal of the Year by NAIDOC, in 2007 he received the Distinguished Pro Bono Sen/ice Award from the Victorian Law Foundation for outstanding contributions to indigenous Rights and in 2012 he was inducted into the inaugural Victorian indigenous Honour Roll.

A pertinent aside, as you would be aware and know from media summaries of such documents as the recent "Report of Government Services", confrontingly on our watch today, across all our communities, our First People continue to suffer huge disadvantage and are appallingly and disproportionately represented in our justice, child protection and alternative care systems. We are all collectively responsible, with a sense of urgency, for the closest collaboration with our Aboriginal communities in addressing these aberrations at all levels. We all, here, today and tomorrow can make a difference in our own unique roles, services and day-to-day community encounters. To describe the circumstances of our aboriginal people, anywhere, as "lifestyle choices" is simply ignorant and disrespectful.

In perusing the eminent career descriptions and obituaries around the late, outstanding Dr Winston Rickards, I was struck and inspired by one repetitive accolade. While literally, he was a world class

leader in the field of Child Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, and leaves an incredible legacy of knowledge to Victoria and far beyond, he never forgot what all this was about. Real children, known by name, had to get real benefit and understanding from any precious encounter. He has been described as having a passion for assiduously seeking to see and understand things through the eyes of the child. He sought to encourage this with his colleagues. Dr Rickards consistently demonstrated hearing the voice of children. I love the anecdote from one of his obituaries. I quote: "Anxious, children responded to Winston's lively and respectful games and conversations. He was rapt in the kids and they in him. For example, Winston obtained a full mental health assessment of a girl by playing cards with her". He connected. While acknowledging his extraordinary qualifications and experience, Winston Rickards' practice was fundamentally relationship based.

This wonderful attribute of Dr Rickards prompts me to raise that particular group of children and young people who have association with Child Protection, Out of Home Care and Youth Justice services. These are the so often invisible and unheard children that simply overwhelm me in my role. You would be aware of the Royal Commission currently in train, examining incidents of sexual abuse whilst in care. While this inquiry is looking at historical matters it is also examining the incidence and likelihood of such harm occurring today in 2015, and the quality of preventative measures and checks and balances in place. In fact, the current hearings in these next couple of weeks are quizzing government departments and funded community services delivering alternative care to children and young people.

A concerning theme arising at this Inquiry, picked up this week in the media, describes professional parties like caseworkers and others becoming so "proceduralised" that little attention is being given to frequently meeting with children and getting to really know how they are going and how they are developing. While this Inquiry is about understanding and preventing terrible things happening in alternative care arrangements, fundamental to this is closely relating to, listening to, and responding appropriately - like any good parent. Yes, we understand accurate file records need to be kept, and there are significant accountabilities to the Courts, funding and registrations bodies and different parties, but if we don't know the children and how they going all of this officialdom is to no avail - tragically sometimes to their further harm - remembering that they come to us in the first instance because they are considered not to be safe!

I have a bit of a hero called Raymond Lemay, a Canadian practice-based researcher in the areas of child protection and care. Occasionally he has done speaking tours in Victoria and I continue to be challenged and impressed by his simple, unassuming, but nevertheless provocative messages. He is engaging, compelling and possibly uncomfortably persistent, in imploring all of us to measure the true value of our best efforts, professional knowledge, and practice knowledge, by how well the vulnerable children and their families we serve and know by name are faring on a day-to-day basis. That is, are their interactions within their family and with the broader community improving and being enriched? Do they have more friends? Do they have more broadening interests? Are they learning and progressing at school? Are they happier? Are they more secure? Are they safer? Are they more attractive to others? In short, are they happy kids?

Lemay rightly presents that if these kinds of measures are not overtly becoming obvious in how we are working - in whatever role we have - our modus operandi has to be radically questioned. Any sense of complacency, or persevering with ways of operating that do not have this kind of honest

impact evidence, are simply holding vulnerable children and families to ransom in their pain, misery and, for some, crippling poverty, with dire lifelong intergenerational legacies. Indeed, Lemay goes further and challenges the legitimacy of some tasks and functions of our services that are minimal, or even useless, in their net worth to our core missions of lifting and helping to sustain improved journeys of our community's most vulnerable and defenceless people. In monetary terms, it may shock you that Lemay presents, at best, 25 cents in the dollar really benefits our service recipients. In fact, for most services Lemay calculates it is more likely to be 15 cents in the dollar!

All of our services need to reflect transparently and hard on the value of delivery and make the necessary changes with a controlled sense of urgency. Do we add value, palpably, to the lives of people we purport to serve?

Since 2007, we have grown in our appreciation of the intrinsic usefulness of trauma-informed approaches to working with our neediest and most at risk children and families. We have never been better informed, as a professional community, on the impact of serious trauma by academics and practitioners such as Bruce Perry and Jack Shonkoff. Perry was only recently on another well-attended speaking tour in Victoria. In fact, this evidence was a key foundational underpinning to the 2005 *Children Youth and Family Act* guiding Child Protection services. We can all recollect the compelling, comparative brains sizes of infants suffering serious, sustained abuse or neglect. While it is important to revisit and refresh this knowledge, it is confounding if this compelling knowledge still does not galvanise us all into insisting on services and interventions that really work for traumatised children and their families. There is exemplary practice in our midst, but what a vulnerable child or family is actually likely to encounter in terms of effective, life-changing service across our state is still patchy and inconsistent.

There is a danger that as agencies and services grow and need to deal more and more with the big end of town, in more and more sophisticated ways — status, competitiveness, ensuring credibility, coupled with sheer anxiety about agency sustainability, will take us more and more away from the visions of inspirational leaders like Dr Rickards and those many other practice heroes you might hold dear, who insist on relationship-based practice with people in pain and actually making immediate and lifelong differences.

"Special"

I suppose I am challenging you and me to stick our necks out if necessary for the sake of better deals, no, the **best** service deals, for the vulnerable children and families that you know by name or will soon meet. We are so important, not only in the present, but also in the future to those we are so privileged to serve. The kindness and capacity we demonstrate is carried for life.

Illustrations

1.

Over the last month or so, I have seen a couple of caseworkers from an agency providing alternative care, thoughtfully and resolutely stick their necks out for the sake of teenage girls, one of whom has a toddler. I might add that senior agency staff have remained a backstop despite a range of organizational pressures with which many of you here will be familiar. These courageous workers have been intently listening to these young women who were being pushed into unsafe and

unsatisfactory lead tenant arrangements as they move into community. Come what may, these girls know they are, and will continue to be precious in the eyes of these particular workers. The young women were articulately and convincingly presenting their needs with the prospect of leaving care in the next year or two. One of these girls was accused by a well-regarded, but obviously pressured senior child protection manager, by saying that the young teenage mother was acting like "a bit of a princess", with the expectations she had. Every girl needs to be like a princess to someone. If people like these caseworkers do not go into bat for her, who will? If workers do not act like a protective and caring parent, who will? If a Commissioner does not come down from the 20th floor of 570 Bourke Street and support this kind of precious approach who will? If an agency manager, or any associated professional, does not come out of the office to model and expect a "Lemay" or "Rickards" approach with the most disenfranchised people, who will?

2.

In preparing for this presentation, I was reminded of an inspirational grandparent caring for three children with special needs and supporting another young adult grandchild boarding in the household with her child. Let's call her Rhona. This wiry lady in her late seventies remains youthful in her energy because of her absolute commitment to these children. It has been incredible to see her struggling to negotiate the child protection, disability, housing, education and health systems, including mental health. It has taken an enormous amount of advocacy to try and get an often siloed system to work effectively, and together, with the carer. This carer and her family are prime examples for services needing to work well across service systems. Individual agency workers and other associated professionals, have needed to be practical in their support, such as pursuing decent housing when it was obvious that there was inappropriate overcrowding in a two bedroom unit. There is currently the need to assist Rhona to identify appropriate educational settings for different children. As the children develop there will need to be a responsive, ongoing "can do" approach from workers in different settings, to assist this grandparent providing stable, loving care of the children.

It is people like Rhona that inspire us to practice in a "Lemay" like way towards the family. At the same time, despite this inspirational heroism from Rhona, effective support has faltered by red tape or different rules of engagement, across service systems to the detriment of the children. Astute mindfulness and reflective practice are critical, if effective and meaningful service is to be maintained for all of the children and families we engage. These children know they are precious in the eyes of Rhona. This foundation is pure gold. Services needs to practically bend over backwards towards assisting this family and the carer. Rhona knows she has a friend at the Commission.

3.

Just recently my wonderful colleague, Andrew Jackomos, the Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People, shared that a manager at the Koori Justice court indicated that he had rarely seen a Child Protection worker or an agency worker accompany a young person to an offence hearing. It smacks of 'out of sight, out of mind' and Youth Justice and Community Service Organisations must work creatively and constructively together with the young person.

4.

A manager at one of the youth justice custodial centres recently shared an interaction with a 16 year old boy due to be released after a sentence. The young person had been under the supervision of Child Protection since infancy, and subsequently came into full-time care in late primary school. He had 15 placements in poorly assessed and supported kinship care arrangements, and problematic foster placements. He subsequently attracted a custodial sentence after multiple brushes with the law while in residential care (state care, mind you). While in custody, his Child Protection order lapsed. The young person told the staff member, as he was leaving, that he felt everyone had left him and he was now on his own as he moved back out into the community. Where were the Child Protection agency support worker and carers during his incarceration?

5.

A case recently came to our attention where two young Koori boys in child protection were on remand, poised to go to court to face charges. They had only fleeting access to duty legal aid solicitors. These children, in the care of the state, were given less than adequate legal representation, with no priority legal access in place, or apparently inadequately pursued by Youth Justice, Child Protection or agency care staff. What would we do, as parents, if our children were in serious trouble with the law? Why do we, as the collective state parent, seemingly be exempted from responses that a child from the general community would expect? Why is this good enough for these children?

6.

Through the Commission's community visitor program at the two Youth Justice custodial centres we often meet children and young people from residential care. It would be extraordinary if a child in the broader community was placed on remand for some of the alleged offences we hear about. How can we as the collective state parent allow an already traumatised child, to have such a scary, contaminating, re-traumatising and demeaning experience happen to them, because of the apparent lack of suitable accommodation options. In one period of time in recent weeks there were eight under 14 year old boys on remand or in custody. All of these boys had come from residential care placements on Child Protection Orders. Six of these boys were Koori. Why is this good enough for these children?

7.

We are confrontingly aware, if not embarrassingly aware, that there is no room for complacency in 2015 on our collective watch, in how we deliver our services to children and families.

Some of you will know that the Commission is currently conducting a systemic inquiry into the incidence of sexual harm, including sexual exploitation being suffered by children and young people currently living in state funded residential care. When this inquiry is completed, it will go publicly to Parliament. Suffice to say at this point that alarmingly, a substantial number of children and young people in residential care have been subjected to this form of harm in a ranges of guises. Most, if not all of these children and young people I have talked about, were seen and known by schools, doctors, other services and the general community, often well before the serious escalation requiring Child Protection services. Two plugs - firstly if we suspect vulnerability in its early stages,

respectfully and actively do something about it! You know what I am talking about — poverty, drug association, family violence, discrimination against a minority group or disadvantage associated with an Intellectual Disability or mental health. Second plug - if you realize that a child, young person is or has required the drastic intervention of Child Protection, alternative care or youth justice ensure they get gold-card style assistance, officially or not. Look to give prompt attention or promote that extra bunk up — in whatever shape that might be — not to be dependent, but to get on with a happier more productive life.

In about a month, I have been asked to launch a terrific, comprehensive electronic service directory for professional groups and agencies serving a particular broad metropolitan area. While certainly happy to do this, I requested a simple quote in promotional material.

"This is an excellent resource for local community service providers - encouraging active, supported referrals to appropriate services, particularly for vulnerable families, children and young people. Any contact with any service by them should feel like a 'one-stop shop'."

A group like this understands I am not suggesting people undertake roles outside their scope or qualifications. Really hearing the voice of vulnerable children, young people and families means going the extra mile, taking your precious encounters that you have, to walk with them, not just send them next door down the road, into the city or to another suburb, to ensure they get the best professional services and assistance possible. I remember going to a young man's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday who had been associated with the care system for nine years. While a happy event it was sad in many ways that all the guests were just workers and other professional people he had got to know. Whatever role we have, we can all be active entrepreneurial agents of connection and change in this regard.

The voice of the vulnerable child reverberates in everything we do, in all walks of life. To hear the voice of the sick child, or the overwhelmed child, or the frightened child, we must lean in and listen hard. They must all feel genuinely special.