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21<sup>st</sup> March, 2005

Dear Sir/Madam,

This letter is a submission to the Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas.

As adoptive parents of a little girl from India, we have a number of concerns we wish to raise that we believe are relevant to this inquiry, but will first give you a brief overview of our experiences.

We were married in 1994, and with both of us having had a lot of involvement with children, were keen to start a family. However, after six years of unsuccessfully trying to have children (with one miscarriage and a number of inconclusive tests done), we decided to look at adopting a child from overseas. We were both accredited foster carers and Jenny was a Primary School teacher, so we felt we were reasonably well equipped to take on the challenges of the adoption process and subsequent allocation of a child. We did not do IVF because of our personal convictions that we didn't want frozen embryos being stored in fridges for (possibly) years – we believe that life begins at conception – and because we weren't comfortable with the idea of life being created in a test tube.

After taking about a year to complete the Victorian side of the process, we were very fortunate to be allocated a child quite quickly from India. She was 3 months old when we were told about her, but it took another five and a half months before we were allowed to go and collect her (paperwork had to be processed through the Indian courts). So in July 2001, we arrived home with our beautiful daughter, [REDACTED]. She took a while to adjust to her new life, as she had spent most of her short life in an orphanage, but she responded well to love and affection and gradually "came out of her shell". She is now 4½ years old and is a bright and happy child attending kindergarten and thriving on new challenges and experiences. She has been a delight to our relatives and friends and, we believe, a great addition to this country.

The views we express in this letter, as well as coming from the perspective of adoptive parents, also come from the fact that we are now birth parents as well, having had a (surprise) biological child in late 2003. We therefore feel that we are in a good position to compare the two experiences and can see discriminations in the way the two sets of parenting situations are treated by authorities.

The rest of this letter will focus on the main changes we would like to see in relation to adoption practices.

1) Reduction in costs to adopt.

We are aware that there are different charges for adoption across the States (this in itself is a problem), but speaking from a Victorian perspective, we believe the costs are too high. For a first adoption, the Victorian Dept. of Human Services fee is over \$6000, and over \$4000 for a second adoption. However, these fees are only the tip of the iceberg. We also have to pay for

such things as: medicals, notarisation of documents, postage of overseas documents, fees to the overseas orphanage, DIMA visa fees (over \$1200), donations (expected) to overseas orphanages, travel costs to go and collect the child. In our case, all these expenses added up to over \$15,000. As birth parents, our costs amounted to about \$1000, with most of our expenses being covered by Medicare. While we realise that there need to be some costs involved in adoption, we don't understand why local adoptions have a very low fee, while overseas adoptions have such a high one. We would have loved to have had this \$15,000 to put towards our daughter's education (it would have just about covered her fees for the Primary School that we would have liked to have sent her to), but now we don't have that money to use for that option. We have had to be very careful with our budget in order to meet the adoption costs.

We would like to see:

- a) Lower State fees for adoption
- b) Waiving of the DIMA \$1200+ visa fee
- c) Tax deductibility (or similar scheme) of adoption costs

2) Equal access to government benefits

Regardless of how a child comes into an Australian family, we believe the child and his/her parents should be entitled to the same government financial assistance as every other family. Adoptive parents have all the same "setting up" costs (e.g. cot, pram, clothes, etc) as birth parents and all the same ongoing costs (e.g. food, clothing, education, etc) – so there should be no reason why they cannot receive the same government assistance, regardless of the age the child was when he/she came into the family (most adoptive children arrive at over 26 weeks of age).

We would like to see:

- a) Maternity Allowance for all adoptive parents
- b) Any future government initiatives to apply equally to all parents

3) Government assistance in disseminating information

Once a child is allocated to a family, it is our experience that there is very little information provided to tell parents what government benefits they are entitled to. DHS did not tell us about Family Tax Benefits A & B, the Baby Bonus or any other relevant information. Many adoptive parents only discover their eligibility for such payments through talking with other adoptive parents.

We would like to see:

- a) A letter sent to all adoptive parents on arrival of their child, outlining what government benefits they are entitled to, and how to go about obtaining them. (Birth parents are given forms to fill out in the hospital – no one does this for adoptive parents).
- b) Clear communication about what legal, and other, processes need to be done when a child arrives (e.g. does the child need to do something to get Australian citizenship; how does the child get added to a Medicare card before their adoption is legalised; can the child have an Australian passport, etc.)

4) Inclusion in government consultation for new family policies

As there are relatively few adoptive parents in proportion to the rest of the "family community", it is easy for the views and needs of adoptive parents to be overlooked. When we spoke to DHS about whether they lobbied on behalf of adoptive parents for inclusion in government policies, we were told that they "didn't have time" to do things like that. Therefore, it would seem that adoptive parents have only themselves to fall back on, and as there aren't many of us, it is difficult to make our views heard (apart from the fact that most of us are already busy raising families and have extra pressures of being visited by social workers and having to send in regular written reports on our children, etc).

We would like to see: a) Overseas adoptive parents consulted on all aspects of family policy that affect ever other Australian family. (Not just consultation with adoption departments, but with real people who have adopted children.)

5) A more understanding and flexible approval system

At present (in Victoria), adoptive parents have to agree to all sorts of conditions put upon them by DHS before they can adopt. While most of these conditions have sound reasoning behind them, they can also fail to take into account the individual needs/circumstances/abilities of different parents.

For example, there is a requirement that there be a two year spacing between children in the family. Well – what if an adoptive family feels they are ready to add to their family before the two years is up? Birth parents can decide to try to have another child whenever they like, but adoptive parents don't have this choice.

Another example – social workers seem to be instructed that they have to make sure prospective adoptive parents have given up all hope to have a biological child before they adopt. Why does it have to be "one or the other"? Our own situation shows that you can quite successfully combine both biological and adoptive children in the one family – we love both our children equally and they are both very well adjusted for their ages.

We would like to see: a) A more flexible, "case by case" approach to adoption issues, with more understanding of adoptive parents' desires to make reasonable choices for themselves without inflexible "rules" being imposed upon them.

We thank you for the opportunity you've given us to express some of our views on adoption issues and look forward to hearing the results of your inquiry.

Yours Sincerely,

 



VICTORIA.