

**Personal Submission to  
The Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas**

**By Ann Plohberger (adoptive parent)  
Residing in Canberra ACT**

**Contents:**

- Maternity payment ineligibility
- Length of time taken to adopt our children
- Direct costs to adopt our children from overseas
- A single child versus siblings
- Romanian moratorium bans international adoptions
- Why adopt these children?

Some of our experiences as an adoptive family:

- Almost leaving Australia without visas for the children
- The Medicare office
- Naming our three adopted children
- Participating in an Australian citizenship ceremony
- Going to the ACT Public Library

**Maternity Payment:**

Our family did not qualify for the maternity payment introduced on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2001, because our three internationally adopted children arrived in Australia from Romania on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2001 – missing out by 20 days.

Had our children arrived 20 days later, of our three children, only one would have been eligible anyway as the age restriction in place then only included children up to five years of age. Our children's ages upon arrival in Australia on 10 June 2001 were 4, 5 and 6 years of age. I feel there should be no age limit because no matter at what age a child is when adopted, adoptive families need support post-placement, in fact "older child adoptions" (generally a child greater than 2yrs of age is considered "older child") require greater levels of support.

Due to bureaucratic, legal, social, practical and political reasons associated with international adoptions, delays lengthen the time taken to adopt a child internationally.

*We first applied to adopt internationally, to the ACT Dept of Family Services, in October 1997. Our three adopted children arrived in Australia on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2001 – the adoption process took our family three years and nine months.*

Children waiting in overseas orphanages are getting older whilst the adoption process is happening. No Australian citizen can apply to adopt internationally, be approved (both here in Australia as well as in the overseas country) and travel overseas to bring their child home to Australia within 26 weeks.

I understand the purpose of the maternity payment is to assist families who have a new child join them, with the financial pressure due to **income forgone**.

*Prior to adopting, both my husband and I were employed full time with no dependants. We were typical DINK's = double income no kids. After adopting our children, we instantly went to five people being supported by one income earner. This was due to the ACT Dept of Family Services insisting one person must be a full time carer for a minimum of twelve months. Birth families do not have to meet such a requirement.*

Also, the maternity payment is to assist families who have a new child join them, with the financial pressure due to **direct costs** of a new child.

*Direct costs to adopt our children included:*

- ACT Dept Family Services, fee to attend compulsory adoption seminar
  - ACT Dept Family Services, fee for home study social worker to visit our home
  - Aust'n Federal Police, fee for police checks on both prospective parents
  - Local General Practitioner, fee for medical checks on both prospective parents
  - Film development costs for photos of us and our home, to be included in our file to be sent overseas
  - Photocopies of legal documents (birth certificates, marriage certificates, home study report, police check, medical reports, photographs, Hague Convention compliance letter etc). Documents required for each prospective parent, multiplied by four sets.
  - Public Notary fee to sight, sign, stamp and bind the above documents
  - Translator's fee to translate all of the above documents into Romanian language
  - Dept of Foreign Affairs fee to stamp all of the above documents
  - International courier fee to send the above documents to Romania
  - Bank fees, to transfer payment to the document translator in Romania
- Cost to this point                      \$7,582.20

- ACT Dept Family Services fee, to update their approval of us from "a single child" to approval for "a sibling group"
  - ACT Dept Family Services fee, social worker's "sibling report"
  - Aust'n Federal Police fee, to update police checks that had expired due to delays in adoption process
  - Local General Practitioner, fee to update medical certificates that had expired due to delay in adoption process
  - Public Notary fee for additional and updated documents
  - Dept of Foreign Affairs fee to stamp (apostille) additional and updated documents
  - Translator's fee to translate additional and updated documents into Romanian
  - International courier fee to send the above documents to Romania
  - Bank fees, to transfer first and second payments to overseas orphanage
- Cost to this point now                      \$31,369.60

- Dept of Immigration, fees for three children's visas
  - International courier fee to Australian Embassy in Yugoslavia (there is no Australian diplomatic post in Romania)
  - Passport style photos of both prospective parents for Romanian Embassy re our visa applications
  - photocopying of documents
  - Romanian Embassy fee for 2 x visa applications (both parents must travel)
  - Bank fees, to transfer third and final instalment to Romanian orphanage
- Cost to this point now                      \$47,290.00

I did not count our costs beyond this point – it was getting frightening just how much money we were outlaying. We had invested so much (both financially and emotionally) by this point, we were past the point of no return.

And the following expenses still needed to be met, even before our children could set foot on Australian soil:

- Airfares: 2 x adult tickets from Canberra to Romania and return, plus 3 x children tickets from Romania to Canberra one-way, was quoted by Qantas at                      \$16,426
- An overnight stop in Switzerland, en-route to Romania, to meet plane connections
- Travel insurance
- Accommodation costs in Romania, for a minimum 7 days, for a family of five people.
- Once allocated, the children are removed from the orphanage into a foster care situation and the prospective adoptive family must meet this cost (at USD\$500 per month).
- Romanian Foundation staff, return travel expenses to the Australian Embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia to process and collect the children's passports with Australian entry visas.

Concordia, the Foundation in Romania that facilitated our children's adoption, charged their fees in United States dollars (USD). In 1997, we budgeted on a foreign exchange rate of \$0.75 USD per Australian dollars (AUD). However, when it came time to paying these fees (late 2000 and early 2001) the foreign exchange rate had dropped to \$0.50 USD to each \$1.00 AUD. Birth families do not have to contend with fluctuations in foreign exchange rates.

Then there were the costs of preparing our home to accommodate three children:

- internal wall changes for extra bedrooms
- a bigger car, one that seated five people
- 3 x child restraints, purchased and fitted to car
- bigger refrigerator and toaster
- electrical safety plugs for power points
- a bigger toothbrush holder that took 5 toothbrushes
- 3 x single beds, 3 x mattresses, 3 x mattress protectors, 3 x pillows, 3 x doonas, multiple sets of bed linen
- bath towels and beach towels, face washers

Then there were the costs of personal items for the children:

- clothes, both summer and winter
- underwear, socks, singlets
- shoes
- toothbrushes, hairbrushes
- swimming costumes
- toys and picture/reading books

*My three children came from the orphanage with nothing, absolutely nothing – not even one pair of underpants between them.*

and they would need items to attend school:

- school uniforms
- school shoes
- lunchboxes and drink bottles
- back packs
- pencil cases and stationery
- writing books and text books

Within a year of our children joining our family in Australia, we had to sell our investment house in Cherrybrook, (The Hills district) NSW to help fund the growing costs we faced.

### **A Single Child Vs Siblings:**

As a couple, we had always hoped for a family with two children. The thought of an only child did not appeal to us.

In 1997, we were both 37 years of age. We knew we had a few years of adoption journey ahead of us and had to complete our adoption before reaching the age of 40 years old. (We were told “there must be no more than 40 years difference between the age of the youngest prospective adoptive parent and the child being adopted”). We also knew that there was a “waiting period” of at least two years between adopting a child and re-applying to adopt another child. A quick calculation showed we would have become too old to do a second adoption. This factor reinforced our desire for a sibling group adoption.

When applying to adopt, we stated our preference for a sibling group. However, the ACT Dept of Family Services told us that we could not apply for siblings because we “did not have daily contact with children” i.e. no parental experience. How can a childless couple gain “daily contact with children”? Birth families are not told they cannot have twins or triplets.

To support our application for siblings, I:

- quit my fulltime employment in Office Administration work and changed my employment to that of a School Assistant (SA2 level) in the hope of gaining “daily contact with children”.
- I also took on a second job as a Medical Receptionist, not only to increase my “daily contact with children” but additionally to increase our income for the mounting adoption costs
- We cared for our interstate nieces and nephews every school holidays
- We voluntarily tutored our neighbours’ children with their homework
- did volunteer work on a weekly basis at Pegasus Farm, a RDA horse-riding school, teaching disadvantaged and disabled children to horse back ride.

Other pre-adoption preparation and education action taken included:

- attending a first aid course, specialising in childhood first aid
- attended local community parenting courses
- undertook to learn the Romanian language
- undertook to learn about Romanian geography, history and culture
- read many books and research papers on parenting institutionalised children
- joined a local adoption support group, Adoptive Families Assoc. of ACT
- joined an interstate adoption support group, Int'l Adoptive Parents Assoc. in Victoria
- joined an online email discussion group, Eastern European Adoption Coalition

Despite all of our above pre-adoption preparations, the (then named) ACT Dept of Family Services, in January 1999, gave us approval for "a single child up to the age of 36 months old". In June 1999 our dossier of approved documents was couriered to Romania. We then continued the wait while the Romanian authorities found and allocated us with a suitable child.

Towards the end of 2000, political changes were happening in Romania. In a bid to enhance Romania's acceptance into the European Union, big improvements in the social welfare area were required, to match those of other European Union country standards. There were rumours circulating of a moratorium being called to halt all international adoptions out of Romania.

Two weeks before Christmas, in December 2000, we received a phone call from our social worker at the ACT Dept of Family Services, asking us if we would consider accepting an allocation of three children: a girl aged 6yrs old and her two younger brothers aged 5 and 4.

We did not understand why we were suddenly being offered siblings when we had only been given approval for a single child. However, we could not have been happier and readily accepted the allocation, pending approval.

### **Why Adopt These Children?**

In 1997 when we first applied to adopt, local adoption (within Australia) was not an option offered to us, in the ACT. No child or baby had been made available for adoption for several years. There was not even a waiting list being kept as some 700 enquiries a year were being made to the ACT Dept of Family Services by ACT families wanting to adopt a child. An international adoption was the only path available to us.

We knew the group of three siblings being offered to us could not stay together if they had any chance to be adopted within Romania. Romanian families can barely afford to feed their own children, let alone take in another child - three children would be impossible to place, within their country of birth, Romania. If this sibling group was not adopted internationally and quickly, they would have been separated from each other and placed into three different Romanian foster care families or worse still, the pending moratorium banning international adoptions would seal their fate to life in a Romanian institution.

*You can take a child out of an institution, but you can't take the institution out of the child.*

We were told that a message went out to all the state/territory central authorities in Australia, trying to quickly find a suitable family for these three siblings. Unusual, as normally there is not much contact between all the different central authorities, apart from their twice a year meetings. We were identified as the only couple in Australia, at that time, who were "paper ready" with documents in Romania, in a reasonable financial situation and prepared to take on such a challenge. We also feel that having just had a new social worker appointed to our case in the previous month made a difference. (A high staff turnover had meant our social worker had changed four times over a period of three years and nine months).

However, to adopt the sibling group being offered to us would mean having to be reassessed and new approval sought from the ACT Dept of Family Services. It also meant a whole lot of new and amended documents being required, along with their translation, notarisation, stamping, sealing, international couriering etc.

In the six months between December 2000 (allocated three children) and May 2001 (travel to collect children), we booked our international flights on four separate occasions and had to cancel them three times. One cancellation was due to ACT Dept of Family Services failing to advise us that we needed to apply to DIMIA for visas for the children (usually a six week process), and on another occasion the children's passports had not returned from the Australian Embassy in Belgrade Yugoslavia in time. We finally left Australia on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2001, with the Romanian moratorium banning all international adoptions, due to commence in June 2001. (My stepfather died in Australia the next night, but I could not stay to say goodbye as we could not risk deferring travel to collect the children). We stayed the minimum required time of one week in Romania, attended court to finalise the adoption proceedings, and returned with our three children to Australia on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2001. The Romanian moratorium came into effect on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2001. We had made it by five days.

Physically, the emotional and financial stress of dealing with the "red tape" required in an international adoption, caused me to lose 12kgs of body weight, in the final three weeks of what was effectively, a three year and nine months long "pregnancy".

I feel it should be stated that our family formation through international adoption has been overwhelmingly supported by our families, friends, work colleagues, local community members and even total strangers. It was truly heart-warming, the strength of emotions expressed to us when people heard about our endeavours to form our family by adoption. When I realised that we would require at least nine sets of single bed sheets, I only needed to mention this to a work colleague in passing and within two days I had been given 20 sets of single bed sheets – such was the desire of the community to support us! Even total strangers (friends of friends) from the local neighbourhood came knocking on our door, showering our as yet unseen children-to-be with gifts and everyday necessities, such as children's bedroom furniture, when they heard through the grapevine about our pending adoption. When people enquired what assistance we would receive from the Australian government, it was embarrassing to have to admit we would not be eligible for any form of special assistance. Certainly, not every family in Australia is in the position of being able to open up their family and welcome unconditionally an unknown child (or children) into their midst, but the overwhelming majority of Australian people respond very positively to those who can and do adopt.

This submission is only the beginning of our story to become a family. The post-adoptive, daily requirements of raising three, post-institutionalised, children, who do not speak English and have suffered grief and separation (from all that is familiar to them: language, country, culture) is another story. A story I would be happy to share, if this inquiry allows for verbal interviews.

Yours sincerely,

Ann Plohberger  
19 McBurney Cres  
Richardson ACT 2905

Phone: (02) 6291 4271  
Mobile: 0427 147 316

22<sup>nd</sup> April 2005

## Some of Our Experiences as an Adoptive Family:

### 1) Almost leaving Australia without visa's for the children

The following is an exact copy of an email I sent to another adoptive parent, who already had her Romanian child, who I had come to know via email. It was written in the final 25 days before we did eventually depart Australia to meet and collect our children in Romania. I feel it highlights very well what a day in the life of an international adoption applicant, is like.

----- Original Message -----

From: "A & G Plohberger" <[integrity1@one.net.au](mailto:integrity1@one.net.au)>

To: <[lynetteross@tassie.net.au](mailto:lynetteross@tassie.net.au)>

Sent: Friday, May 04, 2001 10:42 AM

Subject: Travel

➤ Dear Lynette,

How exciting for the Tassie family to be going early June - we wish them safe travels!!! No, they have not contacted us yet, but I understand they may be running round in circles with excitement and have other, more important things to be doing at this stage.

No, we have no official travel date to work on. (I do have flights booked, on the side, departing 29th May, just in case, with ETA Satu Mare on Fri 1<sup>st</sup> June)

Last Friday we had a major stuff-up.

Rob Cornhill (Ionella and Iulian's dad) and I were chatting on the phone and I asked him about the Australian Embassy in Yugoslavia and somehow he started talking about the children's Australian Visas and paying a \$1,200 fee. I said, what \$1,200 fee? We had never paid this. He got worried and said I should phone someone about this immediately. Turns out, the ACT Dept of Family Services did not know about telling us of this very important step. The children would not have been allowed to enter Australia without a visas - major problem!

The government department (ACT Family Services) has such a high turn-over of staff and I find it very understandable that new staff cannot be expected to know everything that is involved in an international adoption from every country, straight away. Our social worker was very apologetic, she just didn't know about this step. There was no point me stressing further, so I just got stuck into trying to fix the problem.

Anyway, the department needed to prepare a letter and it had to be signed by the department Director. Would you believe that day was actually the Director's last day in the job - she has resigned and there is no new person appointed to the position yet. (This is a regular 3-4mthly happening). Anyway, this put a real rush on getting things done that day, while there was still a Director in that position to sign the letter needed.

While our social worker typed the letter and tracked down the Director's movements for that day, I photocopied other documents and downloaded the immigration forms (23 pages) and tried to fill them in. I had to try four different Justice of the Peace, before I found one who was available at short notice, to certify the photocopies I had made.

At 2pm the social worker and I met in the foyer of some office building where the Director was upstairs having a meeting. The social worker "crashed" the meeting and got the signature on the department letter. Phew.

➤ Then I drove like a maniac into the city to the Dept of Immigration. They shut at 3pm on Fridays and I got there at 2 minutes before 3pm. I was given a number in the queue and collapsed into a seat to wait. With not a great deal of help from the Immigration department, we got the 23 pages of forms completed and the \$1,200 fee paid.

➤

- I then drove like a maniac to the Post Office and made it by 10 minutes before they shut at 5pm. The documents (application for an Australian visa) were finally in an international courier bag on their way to the Australian Embassy in Yugoslavia.

I understand it can take six weeks for Immigration to process applications. Then I suppose we should add on another week for the documents to get to Belgrade.

So who knows when we may ever travel to collect our children ?????? I have no faith in our ACT Family Services whatsoever. Thankfully, the parent support group IAPA in Melbourne is trying to get an answer for us.

Best rgds, Ann in Canberra

➤

## 2) The Medicare Office

Within days of our children arriving into Australia, we had need for them to visit our local general practitioner. Ear infections in the children had become obvious during the five airplane flights it took to bring them from rural Romania to Canberra (Satu Mare to Bucharest, Bucharest to Zurich, Zurich to Singapore, Singapore to Sydney, Sydney to Canberra – a total of 55 hours straight). Because I hadn't yet registered the children with Medicare, I was required to pay the doctor's fee in full, and claim the receipt at Medicare, at a later date.

Having been briefed by the stories of adoptive parents who had gone before me, I went to the Tuggeranong, ACT, office of Medicare, fully armed with every possible document (birth certificates, adoption papers, children's passports) each with their certified, translated copies, plus the documents issued in Australia (Hague compliance letter, ACT Dept of Family Services letter of introduction) and the Medicare application form – every one of which was multiplied by three, for each of my three new children. It was quite an armful – three lever arch files full. The Medicare officer behind the desk even commented on how well prepared I was.

Medicare advised me that after some processing, and all documents being well, I would be issued with a separate Medicare card for my three children. I didn't understand why my children would be on a separate card from mine. As a proud new parent, I was anticipating that I would receive a Medicare card with my three children's names appearing below my name – just like every other family in Australia receives. The reason I was given for the separate card was *"because my children were adopted, they would be on their own separate card, for a 12 month period, in case the adoption did not work out and the children returned to Romania"*. I was speechless, almost. I was a nervous, but very proud new mum to the much awaited and longed for children that I had fought hard, for three long years and nine long months, to adopt. I was not about to return them to Romania, even if I wanted to, there would be nobody in Romania to return them to. Legally they are our responsibility until they attain the age of 18 years. I had the officially issued court papers, stamped, signed, notarised and translated into two languages, to prove it.

In my experience, the government employed Medicare officer showed no knowledge of handling or empathy for an adoption situation. Sure, I looked tired and jetlagged, but it is not fair for a government employee to cast doubt on my new-found parenting abilities, in earshot of a long queue of waiting people.

I had entered the Medicare office with a new-found joy that had recently entered my life and I left the Medicare office feeling discriminated against and with considerably less confidence.

I cannot imagine a birth mother registering her newborn child would have allowance made for the possible return of her child.

## 3) Naming our three adopted children:

As our three children are considered an "older adoption case" we accepted that they would have first names they had identified with for their first 4, 5 and 6 years, respectively. We thankfully even liked their exotic Romanian sounding first names: Raluca, Dan and Alin. We viewed their Romanian first names as something that had been given to them from their birth mother. When a child becomes aware

they have nothing material or tangible from their birth mother, we can say that she did give them their names – and the children accept this statement.

We did however (unofficially) shorten our middle son's name from Bogdan to Dan. At the then age of five years, we asked (through a Romanian interpreter) if he minded us calling him Dan (instead of Bogdan) and he did not mind. His older sister and younger brother copied our lead and were also calling him Dan with 2-3 days, of first meeting us. It is very common in Australia for children's names to be shortened. It is also very common for children attending school in Australia to be teased if there is something "funny" about their name. We certainly did not want to give reason for pranksters to inflict our already confidence-lacking child with *bog* jokes and name calling.

However, had we been allocated an infant (a prospect we anticipated for the first three years of our adoption journey), who had not formed any identity with a certain given name, then our feelings about keeping, changing and/or adding names would have been very different. I would have been very upset if I had no right under law to choose our baby's name, if I so desired.

### **3) Participating in a Citizenship Ceremony**

Under the rules of the Hague Convention, children internationally adopted must, within a two year period of adoption, become full citizens of their new country and proof (copy of citizenship certificate) must be forwarded to the birth country.

In mid 2002, about a year after my children had arrived in Australia, I commenced preparations to meet the above Hague convention requirement. The next celebration of Australia Day, on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2003, appealed to me as an appropriate occasion for my three children to become Australia's newest little citizens. However, I was dismayed to learn that minors (children under 18 years of age) were considered unable to take an oath and therefore could not participate in any official ceremonies. My adopted children were only entitled to receive their certificates in the mail. No fanfare, no celebration or excitement, just a piece of paper that they couldn't read, via the postal system.

As I felt strongly about this, I pursued matters further and after much searching, found that I could apply to the ACT government for a "special dispensation" so my children could participate in the official ceremony that every other new citizen could attend.

Thankfully, in due course, our children received an invitation to attend the official citizenship ceremony in Canberra on Australia Day.

Despite the fact that on 26<sup>th</sup> January 03, only 8 days after the devastating Canberra fires, when the air was still thick with bushfire smoke, and the temperature was 40 degrees plus, my three children had to sit, in the full sun outdoors, in a special roped off section, away from my husband and myself, yet our children made us so proud it brought tears to our eyes. Although they could not understand most of what was said by the official speakers, they sensed the solemnity of the occasion, they actually sat still in their chairs for an entire forty five minutes (a previously unimaginable feat), they came forward when their names were called and received their Australian native tree sapling, a hand held Australian flag to wave and the all important certificate.

Our decision to lobby for our adopted children's right to attend a ceremony was further validated by a Canberra Times newspaper reporter who rushed over to learn more about why three little children were becoming new citizens without their parents. From some 180 new citizens at this ceremony, our family was selected as the heart-warming, good news story to be interviewed and photographed for the next day's edition of the Canberra Times.

Interestingly, although I did not realise it in the immediate days after our children participated in their Citizenship ceremony, the sometimes nervous and unsettled behaviour of our youngest child, Alin, eased considerably for some weeks afterwards. Without us having anticipated such a wonderful benefit, the combined effects of: a colourful big certificate, a public ceremony and the newspaper photo, meant this young adopted boy knew (and the newspaper let every other person know) that he was here in Australia to stay and he was not going to be returned to the orphanage in Romania. That realisation is priceless.



I strongly believe that every child adopted from overseas should have the automatic right to participate in an Australian Citizenship ceremony.

#### **4) Going to the ACT Public Library**

Reading the local newspaper, I was attracted by a news headline that read "Free baby kit for parents". The article claimed the library kit would help increase childhood literacy. As I had three young children who are in need of help to learn a new language as well as acquiring reading skills, this kit sounded very useful for our family. The kits each contain: a cloth library bag, a picture book, a booklet of rhymes and activities, a booklet on the benefits of reading to children, information on services and resources the ACT Library provides to parents and other publications. All useful items my children and I could use – a picture book is good when you can't read the language and my children didn't know any nursery rhymes. I acknowledge that my children are older than babies, but they are emotionally and developmentally much younger than their peers, due to their institutionalisation in a foreign orphanage.

The article continued.... *"modelled on the UK Bookstart Program, research had shown that recipients were consistently performing better at school than the control group"*. Like any new parent, I would like my children to perform well at school too.

I immediately contacted the ACT Public Library on the phone number provided and after explaining the rather unique situation of my children, was told *"your children are not babies, so you cannot receive the free kits"*. Any other new parent in the ACT is eligible to get a free kit for their child, but I am not.