

Chapter 6

Marriage and Relationship Education

The provision of marriage and relationship education

'Education about family and marriages is not new' writes marriage educator, Margaret Andrews:

It occurs in all families and all marriages beginning with the childhood experiences of family life which provide a model for future attitudes and behaviour. We also learn from other sources – friends, school and the media – so that by the time we begin to contemplate a family of our own, we already have formed ideas and developed behaviour patterns that will significantly affect our future relationships. These attitudes and behaviour patterns are further effected by relationships formed during adolescence and the young adult years and by the experiences in the workplace.¹

This aspect of marriage education is important. It points to the fact that the relationships formed between parents and children have an intergenerational effect. Indeed, some educators have posited the theory that one's choice of marriage partner reflects an unconscious attempt to recreate the relationship with parents.²

As subsequent discussion reveals, understanding family backgrounds is a central component of pre-marriage education programs. The manner in which attitudes and behaviours are influenced by our families of origin reflects the reality that programs of education, if they are to be useful and effective, must be cognisant of the informal family education that all people experience.

The expression 'marriage education' has been given a more specific meaning in the context of programs to strengthen marriage and family life. As noted above in Chapter 5, marriage education programs originated in the 1950s, particularly in the Christian Churches.

'The multiple threads of redefined concepts of marriage, a modified culture, and new developments in psychology came together in the early 1960s to create the Marriage Enrichment Movement' writes Dr Bernard Guerney from the National Institute of Relationship Enhancement.³ In a brief history of marriage education, Guerney traces the development of the field in a number of places, including the beginnings of the

1 M Andrews (1994) 'Taking Family Seriously: A national strategy to enhance marriage and family' *Threshold* 44: 14-20.

2 See for example, H Hendrix (1988) *Getting the Love you Want* New York: Simon & Schuster.

3 B Guerney (1997) 'Marriage Education: Past, Present and Future' paper to Family Impact Seminar Washington DC: June.

Marriage Encounter Movement in Spain 1962, and the formation Marriage Enrichment by David and Vera Mace in Pennsylvania the same year. Similar developments occurred in Australia. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the Catholic and other churches conducted Pre-Cana conferences for the engaged.⁴ A more formal structure developed with the formation of the Catholic Society for Marriage Education in 1973 and the Australian Association for Marriage Education in 1979. The latter body became the Marriage Educators Association of Australia in 1995. Albeit, initially very small, the Commonwealth Government supported these initiatives through grants to organisations providing marriage education.

The basis of marriage education

The development of marriage education in Australia has involved a convergence of educational, psychological and behavioural ideas over the past few decades. These ideas include emerging concepts of adult education, the notion that relationship skills can be learnt, an understanding of some of the processes occurring in relationships, and the theory that life involves a number of stages or transitions that people go through. Further, the programs have been informed by changes in cultural and legal aspects of marriage and family relationships. These developments and understandings are outlined in more detail in the following section.

Concepts of adult education

Four concepts have been recognised in the emerging field of adult education over recent decades: the concept of lifelong education; the increased recognition that most learning is self-directed; the emphasis on recurrent education; and the idea of community education.⁵ In a presentation to the National Marriage Education Conference, Jane Sampson related these ideas to the field. According to her, the relevant adult learning principles are:

- Adults can and do learn throughout their lifetime;
- Adults bring to learning perception, self-perception, self-esteem and confidence. These need to be valued and built upon;
- Past experience of learners is a useful resource (although it can also interfere with learning); and
- Learning needs to be relevant – related to the learner's present problems, needs, and experiences.⁶

4 M Andrews *supra*.

5 G Selman (1978) 'Emerging Education Concepts: A Canadian Viewpoint' *National College Educational Review*: 32.

6 J Sampson (1988) 'Adult education principles as applied to adult education' paper to the National Marriage Education Conference Sydney.

The developing field of adult education is reflected in changes to marriage education over the past five decades. Beginning in the 1940s programs organised by organisations such as the Young Christian Workers involved a didactic approach to the subject. Upwards of 50–60 couples would attend these Pre-Cana conferences which, according to Burnard, promoted Christian values as a solution to the increasing incidence of marital breakdown.⁷ In one program presented in the late 1950s, lectures were given in the following subjects: Christian marriage in a pagan world; masculine and feminine psychology; courtship and engagement; the marriage ceremony; parenthood; Christ, the king of the home; discussion on homemaking; masculine and feminine physiology; and the morals of marriage. Lectures were given by a panel of speakers, including married couples, clergy, bankers and doctors. For some lectures, men and women were divided into separate groups.⁸

While it is difficult to precisely identify the timing, a clear change in educational style had emerged by the mid-1970s. Hence the description of a course conducted by the Marriage Guidance Council of South Australia in 1971: 'The emphasis is on group work . . . the groups may meet for instruction but separate off into couples or just individuals to carry out a task. There is a little information giving in order to satisfy anticipated needs, but no real lecturing at any stage.'⁹ In their national survey of marriage education in Australia in 1992, Harris et al, while cautioning about drawing too rigidly the demarcation between programs utilising experiential learning models and those drawn from pre-established packages, nonetheless indicate that adult education principles have been incorporated largely into most marriage education programs.¹⁰

Work by Dr Moira Eastman in the field of family education (including marriage education) has identified a number of approaches to learning that are likely to be more successful. These include:

- conjoint approaches (where two or more members of a family take part in a learning situation) as opposed to purely individual approaches;
- dynamic and process learning approaches, where family members are involved in direct interchanges with others;
- carefully structured approaches, which are grounded in theory, and have specific content and processes (rather than unstructured programs consisting of talks or free flowing discussions);
- the opportunity for members to gather information on how they currently related and how they are currently perceived;

7 D Burnard (1978) 'Introduction' in R T Fitzgerald (ed) *Education for marriage: some perspectives* papers presented to the National Conference for Pre-marital Education, ANU, Canberra. Melbourne: The Marriage Education Institute.

8 R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia, 11.

9 Ibid. 13.

10 Ibid. 54–55.

- the opportunity to learn new behaviour and have time to try it out, practice it, and observe the effects of it; and
- active game-like processes.¹¹

Eastman identified the need to match programs to the needs and styles of individual families and the importance of screening for this purpose. In their 1992 Australian study of pre-marriage education, Harris et al found that both participating couples and marriage educators placed considerable emphasis on the use of adult education principles.¹²

These understandings are reflected in the development of marriage education programs: the former didactic approaches have been replaced by programs based around adult education principles; and a range of programs that reflect different emphases on individual couple work, group processes, and the use of inventories have been initiated. These developments are reflected in the details of the various programs outlined in the Committee's survey of marriage and relationship education providers.

Psychological and behavioural theories

Different theories of psychological and behavioural study have been employed in the development of marriage education programs. In an early work on marriage enrichment in the US in 1983, Diana Garland identified the major approaches supporting the post-wedding programs as General systems theory; client-centred theory; behavioural theory; and marriage enrichment in the Church.¹³

According to Garland, *General systems theory* 'has become the dominant theoretical framework in the treatment of marital and family relationships and thus the basis for the development of a variety of marriage enrichment programs'.¹⁴ General systems theory is concerned with the processes and structures of relationships rather than specific issues couples might want to address. Programs developed from this theory emphasise teaching skills that couples can use as tools to develop awareness of their interactional patterns and to modify those patterns with changes in one another and their environment. These skills may include self-awareness, communication and other awareness, negotiation, and problem solving.

The *client centred therapy* developed by Carl Rogers¹⁵ has been the basis for another major group on marriage enrichment programs. Rogers central hypothesis is that 'the

11 M Eastman (1984) 'Education for family life: What kind of knowledge do families need?' paper to Australian Family Research Conference.

12 R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia 53.

13 D Garland (1983) *Working with Couples for Marriage Enrichment* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

14 *ibid.* 17-18.

15 C Rogers (1961) *On Becoming a Person* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

growthful potential of any individual will tend to be released in a relationship in which the helping person is experiencing and communicating realness, caring, and a deeply sensitive nonjudgmental understanding.¹⁶ This approach also involves skills development, particularly in being able to communicate to a partner with acceptance and understanding, to recognise feelings and motivations, and being able to express them clearly.

Behavioural therapy is based on theory derived from experimental research and is designed to discover basic principles of learning. It has resulted in such concepts as positive and negative reinforcement, conditioning and shaping.¹⁷ Although Garland reports that it has been applied less often than the other theories to educational programs or nonclinical couples, it too places emphasis on communication and negotiation skills.

The fourth category identified by Garland in her US study of marriage enrichment, *Marriage enrichment in the church*, 'is based on the belief that persons who have learned to satisfy their basic needs should continue to grow by developing their creativity and their unused potentials'.¹⁸ Marriage Encounter is identified by the author as the most prominent of the programs within this category.

Considerable care needs to be taken in applying these categories to marriage education in Australia. First, Garland's study was of post-wedding marriage enrichment programs, rather than the pre-wedding programs which are in the overwhelming majority here. Secondly, as Garland concedes, marriage educators have combined different theoretical models when designing programs. Thirdly, the reference to marriage education in the church is likely to mislead. Only a relatively small minority of Australian programs are of the type described by Garland as 'church-based', and then largely in the post-wedding enrichment field. Indeed most programs offered by marriage and family agencies in Australia, whether religious or secular in affiliation, tend to have been developed using a combination of general systems, client-centred and behavioural theories. In a recent review of the literature, Simons concluded that 'programs based on general systems theories or behavioural theories hold the greatest promise of consistently positive outcomes'.¹⁹

The life cycle

Marriage education has been informed by new understandings of the transitions that couples experience in their lives. Professor Edward Bader, a Canadian marriage

16 BD Meandor and CR Rogers (1973) 'Client-Centred Therapy' in R Corsini (ed) *Current Psychotherapies* Itasca Ill: Peacock.

17 Garland supra 29.

18 Garland supra 35.

19 M Simons (1995) paper to NSW/ACT Marriage Education Conference Sydney.

educator, identifies eight stages in the life cycle: leaving home; getting married; learning to live together; parenting the first child; living with the adolescent; launching children; retirement; and old age.²⁰ The fact that most marriage education in Australia involves couples in the pre-marriage stage is partially a reflection of this transition.

Halford et al note that:

Couples typically progress through a series of normative transitions, such as moving in and living together, getting married, having children, children entering school, the departure of children from the family home, and retirement from paid employment. Most couples also experience other less predictable changes, such as a major illness or injury, death of a close family member, unemployment, re-entry to the workforce after a break away, and changes in the place of residence. All these transitions represent periods of change characterised by specific tasks and challenges, and research demonstrates that couples experience more difficulties and are more vulnerable to the development of distress during these critical periods. However these transitional periods also represent an opportunity for positive change when the developing relationship system is adapting to transitions.²¹

These transitions inform marriage education practice. As Willis notes:

Pre-marriage education by definition takes place at a major crossroad in the learners' lives. The learning which people undergo to understand and manage major changes in their lives has been called transition learning and a whole raft of loosely sequenced processes have been identified as taking place during this form of learning – introspection, forecasting and interpreting, skilling, making choices, letting go the past, healing and re-building and finally grounding the decision in action. Many pre-marriage education programs will be dealing with learners engaged in one or other of these processes.²²

Marriage educators have emphasised the importance of understanding family backgrounds:

Increasingly it is recognised that when we marry, we bring to the relationship different attitudes, ideas and behaviour patterns that were developed in our respective families. A simple illustration emphasises the importance of recognising the impact of family backgrounds:

20 E Bader (1989) 'A visitor's Report: Working with Families' *Threshold* 25: 9–10. See also, WK Halford and BC Behrens (1996) 'Prevention of marital difficulties' in P Cotton & HJ Jackson (eds) *Early Intervention and Preventative Interventions in Mental Health Applications of Clinical Psychology* Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

21 Halford (1996) *supra* 22.

22 P Willis (1994) 'Identifying forces shaping adult education: Lessons from pre-marriage education' *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education* 34(3): 185–194.

Jack and Jill have known each other for some time and plan to marry. Jack was raised in a family where money was regarded as something to use, not to save. If you cared for someone, you would buy them an expensive gift as a real sign of your friendship, appreciation or love. In Jill's family, money was saved. Thrift was encouraged. Expensive gifts were a sign of frivolity rather than love.

During their courtship and engagement, Jack takes Jill to restaurants, buys her flowers and gifts for her birthday and other special occasions. Jill is attracted to Jack's differences. She sometimes worries about the amount of money he spends, but also likes the attention he pays her. However they both have jobs and finance is not a concern for them.

After the wedding, Jack and Jill purchase a home. Later they have a child, Jill stops working and they are living on one income. Something else happens to. Now they seem to fight about the use of their money. Jill no longer finds the same attraction in Jack's liking for restaurants and expensive gifts. Jack resents having to save more and more money for increasing mortgage repayments and other household items. He thinks that Jill has changed.

Had they been asked about money before their marriage, Jack and Jill probably would have replied that they had sufficient and it wasn't a problem for them. Marriage counsellors report that marital difficulties relating to money are seldom about the lack of it, but rather about its use. If Jack and Jill had been able to recognise learned family patterns of behaviour which influenced their attitudes to money before they married and had discussed them, they may have been more able to negotiate the conflicts and differences of opinion that later emerged.

This scenario can be repeated in many other areas of a relationship: How did my family members communicate with each other? How was conflict dealt with, and did this differ from the way it was dealt with by my partner's family? Thus an increasing emphasis in marriage education is recognising and understanding the influence of family backgrounds upon relationships.'²³

In *Becoming Married*, Anderson and Fite identify a series of family tasks associated with transitions in the life cycle:²⁴

23 Marriage Education Programme, *Submissions*, p. S284

24 H Anderson and RC Fite (1993) *Becoming Married* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 7.

Transitions in the Family Life Cycle

Transitional Event	Leaving home events	Wedding	Birth of first child	Last child leaves	Death of a spouse
Family Tasks	Leaving home Identity formation	Becoming married Leaving home Identity formation	Raising children Becoming married Leaving home Identity formation	Promising again Raising children Leaving home	Living alone Identity reformation

Source: H Anderson and R Cotton Fite (1993) *Becoming Married* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press

Anderson and Fite assert that recognition of these life cycle transitions is significant:

Leaving home is a necessary precondition for the process of becoming married. Like leaving home, the process of becoming married takes time. It begins before the wedding but is not likely to be completed until much later, when both partners in a marriage discover that the emotional bond between them is deep and sure.²⁵

In this context, the wedding ceremony is the transitional event that publicly inaugurates a new family task of becoming married. But the physical leaving of home does not necessarily mean that emotional separation has occurred. This may partly explain the increasing social science evidence about cohabitation and marital satisfaction. For many couples there may have been a partial leaving and partial cleaving together:

Nonmarital living together shifts the meaning of the wedding . . . People after living together may overlook the work of adjusting to marital roles, which can only be done after the couple's private bond has been granted public status and they have become declared to be husband and wife . . . There is no guarantee that couples living together have indeed finished the leaving home agendas. Their experience of living together may have intentionally ignored the marital patterns of either family of origin because they were determined to do it differently from their parents. Moreover, while it is possible that cohabiting couples have developed some skills in relating, marriage generally is more demanding and entails more responsibility and more work than living together.²⁶

25 *ibid.* 15.

26 *ibid.* 107–108.

Hence the author of the PREPARE pre-marital inventory, Dr David Olson, outlines a checklist of issues that can be used for working with cohabiting couples²⁷ and the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory has been redesigned to include a special section for cohabiting couples.

Recognition of the pressures and stresses of the period after the wedding has also attracted renewed attention from marriage educators:

The period from the honeymoon until after the birth of the first child involves major changes in a couple's relationship. It involves establishing an intimate relationship with each other, emotional separation from parents, adjusting to each other's family, negotiating domestic tasks, changing roles for the woman from that of the worker or career person to wife and mother, and usually adjusting to a single income (at least in the short term). This period calls for considerable skills in being able to effectively communicate with each other, resolve conflict, handle finances, define joint intimacy and sexuality, establish a family and set up a new home, often in an unfamiliar suburb away from family and friends.²⁸

It is notable that these early years of marriage coincide with a significant period of marital separation. According to the latest statistics, the approximately 50 per cent of those couples who separate do so within eight years of the wedding.²⁹ It follows that the early years of marriage involve important transitions.

Although our survey of marriage education indicates a considerably lower attendance at post-wedding marriage education or marriage enrichment programs than pre-marriage programs, attention to this phase has increased. Programs conducted in Toronto, Canada, by a coalition of providers including various churches and the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto have been developed to include both pre- and post-wedding components.³⁰ The Canadians report a high return rate to the post-wedding evenings conducted 9-12 months after the wedding. They describe the pre-wedding components as important because couples become aware of what can be learnt from marriage education, but the post-wedding components as crucial because they occur at a time when the couples are experiencing the day to day reality of marriage.

Drawing on this experience, the Marriage Education Programme Inc., Melbourne, with support from the Attorney-General's Department, has embarked on a pre- and

27 D Olson (1994) *Marriage and the Family: Diversity and Strengths* San Francisco: Mayfield.

28 Marriage Education Programme, *Submissions*, p. S1053.

29 Australian Bureau of Statistics, see Chapter 2.

30 E Bader (1989) 'A visitor's report: Working with families' *Threshold* 25: 8.

post-wedding programme which comprises two days for engaged couples prior to their wedding and a third day some 9–12 months after the event.³¹

The Triple P Positive Parenting Group Program, developed in Western Australia, is a further example of an initiative based on a life transition event.³² The project, which arose from the WA Child Health Survey, seeks to apply a behavioural family intervention to reduce the prevalence of conduct disorder. The target group for the project involved three and four year old children and their families:

The program's aim was to reduce and prevent disruptive behaviour disorders, which include conduct disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. We are wanting to do this by reducing the use of aversive parenting behaviours, increasing the use of positive parenting behaviours, increasing parent self-efficacy in parenting, reducing parental depression, anxiety and stress, reducing the general level of marital problems, and consequently improving social competency and educational outcomes in the child.³³

In discussions with the Committee, Professor Zubrick indicated that it would be possible to design a preventive program that could be useful at an earlier stage of a marital relationship in order to address communication and other issues for couples.³⁴

Research about marital dysfunction and marital education

A growing body of research about the causes of marital dysfunction and the value of marriage education is becoming available. The research can be divided into a number of categories:

1. Basic research, of which there are two kinds: explanatory research and predictive research; and
2. Applied research, of which there are two kinds: controlled outcome studies (or efficacy studies) and uncontrolled outcome studies (or effectiveness studies).³⁵

Basic research: prediction studies

31 Marriage Education Programme, *Submissions*, p. S1055.

32 Ms Anwen Williams, *Transcript*, pp. 713–727. See also, A Williams, S Zubrick, S Silburn & M Sanders (1997) *A population based intervention to prevent childhood disruptive behaviour disorders: The Perth Positive Parenting Program Project*.

33 *ibid.* 715.

34 Professor Stephen Zubrick, *Transcript*, p. 721.

35 These categories and the subsequent discussion draws on the work of Professor Thomas Bradbury. See, T Bradbury (1997) 'Understanding and Altering the Longitudinal Cause of Marriage: A Review of the Research' paper to the Strategies to Strengthen Marriage Roundtable Washington DC: Family Impact Seminar.

Prediction studies provide clues to the causes of marital distress. They seek to answer questions such as ‘Which marriages are likely to fail?’ and ‘What factors can help predict the outcome of marriages in the future?’

According to Professor Bradbury ‘these studies provide clues about what might cause marital distress. They are also important because they can suggest what should be changed to make marriages more durable and satisfying, and because they can suggest which couples might be targeted for prevention programs.’

Basic research: explanation studies

Explanation studies are longitudinal studies that answer questions such as ‘How do marriages change? How do marriages succeed and fail? How is it that happy newlywed couples change so often to become unhappy couples later in marriage?’

‘These studies are important because they can identify the causal pathways by which different marriages achieve different outcomes’ notes Professor Bradbury. ‘They can help explain how variables assessed early in marriage exert their influence over time to produce dissolved versus intact marriages and marriages with varying degrees of satisfaction.’

There are more than 100 published studies examining the longitudinal course of couple relationship satisfaction and stability.³⁶

The studies indicate that a range of factors are associated with poorer marital outcomes, including: neurotic personality, poor communication, stressful events, childhood adversity, premarital cohabitation, and higher age at marriage. In summary three broad classes of variables have an impact on relationship problems: adaptive processes within the couple relationship, stressful events impinging upon the couple, and enduring individual vulnerabilities of the partners.

Although they do not necessarily relate to reported relationship satisfaction at the time³⁷ communication difficulties and deficits in conflict management behaviours observed in engaged couples can prospectively predict divorce and relationship dissatisfaction over the first decade of marriage;³⁸ and predict the development of verbal and physical aggression in the first few years of marriage.³⁹ Although many

36 BR Karney & TN Bradbury (1995) ‘The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method and research’ *Psychological Bulletin* 118: 3–34.

37 HJ Markman & K Hahlweg (1993) ‘The prediction and prevention of marital distress: An international perspective’ *Clinical Psychology Review* 13: 29–43.

38 *ibid.*

39 CM Murphy & KO O’Leary (1989) ‘Psychological aggression predicts physical aggression in early marriage’ *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 57: 579–582.

couples form relationships, the observed difficulties predispose couples to develop later problems and predict deterioration in relationship satisfaction and stability.⁴⁰ A second range of adaptive processes involve the beliefs and expectations with which individuals enter relationships.⁴¹ Unrealistic expectations about communication, conflict resolution, the importance of family and friends, and gender roles, are linked to higher rates of erosion of relationship satisfaction.⁴²

Secondly, relationship problems are more likely to develop during periods of high rates of change and stressful events.⁴³ Events in the life cycle such as parenthood⁴⁴ changing employment, and retirement can be times of stress. Another stressful transition is entering a second or subsequent marriage, especially where there are dependent children of previous relationships.⁴⁵ Similarly, a partner developing health problems can cause marital distress.⁴⁶

Thirdly, familial history, and personal backgrounds that partners bring to a relationship involve enduring vulnerabilities.⁴⁷ Hence particular events in an individual's family history such as the divorce of parents⁴⁸ and aggression between parents⁴⁹ are associated with increased divorce and aggression respectively in

-
- 40 JM Gottman (1993) 'The role of conflict engagement, escalation, and avoidance in marital interaction: A longitudinal view of five types of couples' *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61: 6–15; and JM Gottman (1994) 'What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes' Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 41 WK Halford et al 'Distance Delivery of Relationship Education,' unpublished paper: Appendix 1 research on the nature of marriage and relationships, and the potential role of relationship education.
- 42 DH Olson & BJ Fowers (1986) 'Predicting marital success with PREPARE: A predictive validity study' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 12: 403–413; DH Olson & AS Larsen (1989) 'Predicting marital satisfaction using PREPARE: A replication study' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 15: 311–322; BJ Fowers et al (1995) 'An examination of the predictive validity of an empirically based typology of engaged couples' *Threshold* 48: 8–13 ;A Craddock (1996) 'A typology of engaged couples: Identifying and working with different types of premarital couples' *Threshold* 51: 20-25; L Williams, J Jurich & W Denton, FD Fincham & TD Bradbury (1990) *The psychology of marriage* New York: Guilford.
- 43 'The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method and research' *Psychological Bulletin* 118: 3–34.
- 44 CP Cowen & PA Cowen (1992) *When Partners become Parents* New York: Basic Books Bader.
- 45 A Booth & JN Edwards (1992) 'Starting over: why remarriages are more unstable' *Journal of Family Issues* 13: 179–194; TC Martin & LL Bumpass *Demography* 26: 37–51; and JM Lawton & MR Sanders (1994) 'Designing effective behavioral family interventions for stepfamilies' *Clinical Psychology Review* 14: 463–496.
- 46 WK Halford et al (1997) *supra*.
- 47 Karney & Bradbury (1995) *supra*.
- 48 ND Glenn & KB Kramer (1987) 'The marriages and divorces of the children of divorce' *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49: 811–825; and P Amato. *Threshold* 54: 15–27.
- 49 CS Widom (1989) 'Does violence beget violence? A critical examination of the literature' *Psychological Bulletin* 106: 3–28.

relationships formed by offspring. According to some recent studies, exposure to negative expectations of marriage⁵⁰ and deficit in communication patterns between parents⁵¹ involve mechanisms that are replicated by the children when forming their own relationships, that is, that communication difficulties may be acquired through observation and interaction with parents. Other factors include a history of psychological disorders.⁵²

Applied research: intervention studies

Intervention studies are experiments that answer questions such as ‘Do couples participating in a specified premarital intervention have better marriages several years later than couples who do not participate in such an intervention? Do couples participating in program X have better marriages than couples participating in program Y?’

‘Studies of this sort are important because they provide information about what specific strategies can and cannot be expected to prevent marital distress and divorce, at least under controlled conditions’ writes Professor Bradbury. ‘Moreover, without research of this sort, we will have no rationale for selecting or recommending particular programs; even the most poorly conceived programs could be viewed as plausible and legitimate in the absence of sound intervention studies.’

The major intervention study undertaken has reviewed Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) – a 15 hour intervention designed by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley and colleagues at the University of Denver. It is designed to teach couples those skills that have been linked to successful marital functioning. Assessments taken at 1.5 and 3 years following participation in the program indicated that PREP couples are more satisfied than untreated couples. The evaluation found that:

- at 1.5 and 3 year follow-ups, intervention couples were found to show less decline in relationship satisfaction compared to the control groups;
- at 3 year follow-up, other measures of relationship quality reflected that intervention couples were doing better than controls (although by the four and five year follow-ups no further significant differences were reported on self report measures); and
- up to the 4 year follow-up, intervention couples were also reported to have more positive and less negative communication than couples in the control group on

50 LE Black & DH Sprenkle (1991) ‘Gender differences in college students’ attitudes towards divorce and their willingness to marry’ *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage* 15: 47–60.

51 WK Halford, MR Sanders & BC Behrens (1994) ‘The prevention of marital distress: The Aussie PREP project’ paper to Association for the Advancement of Behaviour Therapy San Diego CA: November.

52 WK Halford et al (1997) *supra*.

observable measures; and at the 1.5 and 3 year follow-ups, control groups reported significantly greater rates of divorce and break-up prior to marriage than the intervention groups (although by the 4 and 5 year follow-ups, the difference between the two groups was not significant).⁵³

A subsequent study, by Hahlweg and colleagues, of approximately 100 couples using EPL, the German version of PREP, found that although five years following the intervention the groups did not differ in marital satisfaction they did differ dramatically in the quality of the behaviours they exchanged; couples receiving the intervention were more positive and less negative on a range of behavioural indices.

Three years following participation in the program, participating couples were less likely to dissolve their relationships than all control couples. The participating couples were also more satisfied with their marriages than were control couples after 3 years.

‘One of the advantages of intervention studies is that they tell us about what can be accomplished with particular programs, but they often fail to tell us about the pre-marital interventions that couples typically receive in the community’ writes Professor Bradbury⁵⁴ For this purpose, use is made of application studies.

Applied research: application studies

Application studies are non-experimental studies in which the investigator usually does not have control over the programs administered. ‘These studies answer questions such as ‘Are couples who participate in premarital programs at greater risk for later marital problems, compared to couples who do not participate in these programs? Are couples happy with the interventions they have received? Are couples who participated in premarital programs more maritally satisfied than couples who did not participate in these programs?’ notes Professor Bradbury.

A series of studies indicate that most couples report high satisfaction with their experience of preventive premarital programs:

- a nationwide US random telephone survey – 75 per cent of the couples who had had premarital education in a religious context reported that the preparation had been helpful to them;
- Sullivan and Bradbury found that approximately 90 per cent of couples who had taken premarital education would choose to do so again – though the study reported no differences on marital outcomes between those who did and those who did not have some premarital education; and

53 HJ Markman et al (1993) ‘Preventing marital distress through communication and conflict management training: A 4 and 5 year follow-up’ *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61: 70–77.

54 T Bradbury (1997) paper to Family Impact Seminar supra.

- The Creighton University Report on premarriage education in the Catholic Church found that, within the first four years of marriage, 80 per cent of the individuals surveyed reported the training as valuable.

Australian study

A 1991 evaluation of pre-marriage education by researchers at the University of South Australia surveyed 1,698 people attending marriage preparation programs throughout Australia. The study which surveyed couples at the conclusion of their participation in a premarriage program and again three months later found:

- 80 per cent of couples rated their program as good or excellent;
- 90 per cent of couples reported that after attending a pre-marriage program they would seek professional help if problems arose in their marriage;
- 42 per cent of couples reported that their ideas about marriage had changed as a result of attending a program; and (significantly); and
- 5 per cent of couples reported that they had either postponed or cancelled their wedding after attending a program.⁵⁵

After reviewing the various studies, Dr Scott Stanley notes:

Couple satisfaction with preventative interventions is an important measure of outcome. While the studies on program effectiveness are complicated and open to various interpretations, there can be no doubt that couples who take part in preventive experiences come away valuing those experiences.⁵⁶

Limitations of studies

The leading researchers into the effectiveness of pre-marriage education have identified limitations of the various studies. The prediction studies are relatively small and appear to involve well-functioning couples; most of the explanation studies examine 100 or fewer couples, using written questionnaires with significant non-completion rate and show weak effects; selection effects may be operating with the intervention studies and the participating couples may be low risk; and research is needed with application studies to determine how to increase participation rates of couples at risk for later marital difficulties.⁵⁷

In a recent contribution to the literature, Halford and Behrens note two problems with research in this field. The first is the ongoing difficulty of 'devising appropriate comparison conditions for a controlled trial' and the second is the need for adequate long-term follow up beyond a short time period of a few weeks or months.

55 R Harris, M Simons, P Willis & A Barrie (1992) *Love, sex & Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

56 SM Stanley (1997) 'Acting on what we know: The hope of prevention' *Threshold* 56: 6–13.

57 T Bradbury (1997) paper to Family Impact Seminar supra.

Nonetheless, the authors are optimistic about the programs: 'Despite the limitations of the existing research, it is clear that skills-based interventions do modify aspects of marital interactions identified as risk factors for marital distress.'⁵⁸

In the first meta-analysis of premarital, marital and family intervention programs, in 1985, Giblin and colleagues identified a possible approach for future research, namely, in examining the effectiveness of programs 'it may be more important to know how investigators have chosen to measure enrichment than to know the facts related to the programs themselves.' While this pointer to future study is of continuing interest to researchers, it doesn't diminish their primary conclusion: 'The current study is the most comprehensive, integrative summary of the enrichment literature to date. It should lay to rest the charge that "enrichment is ineffective".'⁵⁹

The Expansion of Programs

In 1976, the then Commonwealth Attorney-General, Hon RJ Ellicott, provided funding for marriage education programs pursuant to provisions in the *Family Law Act 1975*. This funding coincided with considerable development of the programs during the 1970s and 80s. Part of the change was away from didactic presentations to courses involving the emerging notions of adult education. As a course conducted by the Marriage Guidance Council of South Australia in 1971 stated: 'The emphasis is on group work . . . the groups may meet for instruction but separate off into couples or just individuals to carry out a task. There is little information giving in order to satisfy anticipated needs, but no real lecturing at any stage.'⁶⁰

Bernard Guerney has traced the developments that occurred in the United States which have parallels in Australia, in particular the distinction between a therapeutic and educational model of prevention:

Marital and family therapy is distinguished from enrichment/problem prevention because its utility is restricted to those couples in the third category, ie., to families already experiencing great distress and, usually, crisis. Except for the therapies that have adapted an Educational Model of therapy, therapy generally fails to even address the issue of building a behavioral repertoire that can prevent future problems. The orientation of therapists that are not using a therapy based on an Educational Model is to determine what the problem is and to eliminate it, assuming that when that is done, whatever is necessary for the family to achieve individual and relationship goals already is inherently

58 WK Halford & BC Behrens (1996) 'Prevention of Marital Difficulties' in P Cotton & HJ Jackson (eds) *Early Intervention and Preventative Interventions in Mental Health Applications of Clinical Psychology* Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society.

59 P Giblin, DH Sprenkle & R Sheehan (1985) 'Enrichment Outcome Research: A Meta-Analysis of Premarital, Marital and Family Interventions' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 11(3): 257-271.

60 Cited in R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

available and will be free to emerge. They are typically not oriented towards teaching clients specific new behavioral skills that not only allow the clients to themselves resolve current problems, but that also empower them to eliminate future problems. Rather, marital therapists following the medical model would see it as the *therapist's* responsibility to develop a strategy for solution because of the conviction that only the therapist is trained in the necessary skills. If new problems should develop, clients are expected to return to the therapist to get help in resolving them. Couples are no more expected to prevent or resolve family problems themselves than a physician would expect a patient to prevent an attack of appendicitis, or to remove the appendix if that is the organ that next happened to get infected. In contrast, many of the enrichment programs were viewed by their creators as serving the purposes both of enrichment and of problem-solving. And all of the skill-based programs have been seen as serving both of these goals.⁶¹

It is notable that the successful Australian programs have also followed an educational model.

Enrichment programs have been classified in the past into three categories: (1) structured enrichment in which a leader systematically reviews issues with couples with little interaction; (2) semi-structured discussion groups, begun by the Association for Couples for Marriage Enrichment (known as the Couples for Marriage Enrichment Australia – CMEA – in this country) and (3) insight and skill focussed programs such as Couple Communication, Marriage Encounter, Relationship Enhancement and PREP (the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program).⁶² Subsequent developments reflect three major emphases:

- assessment, including structured enrichment;
- information and awareness; and
- skill-training models.⁶³

This three-fold approach not only reflects developments in Australian marriage education, as the subsequent discussion reveals, it provides a comprehensive, research founded basis upon which to assess the provision of marriage education in the nation currently, and a categorisation for future support.

1. Assessment approaches

61 B Guerney Jr (1997) *Marriage Education: Past, Present and Future* Washington DC: Family Impact Seminar.

62 EL Worthington, BG Buston & TM Hammonds (1989) 'A component analysis of marriage enrichment: Information and treatment modality' *Journal of Counselling and Development* 67: 555–560.

63 These approaches should not be confused with intervention strategies, such as primary, secondary and tertiary target groups: see WK Halford & BC Behrens 'Prevention of marital difficulties' *supra*.

Assessment approaches seek to gather data on partner attitudes and behaviours which can be used to set growth goals and attitude or behaviour change. The underlying belief is that insights about one's attitudes, behaviours, and expectations can lead to changes in thinking or behaving that give marriages a better chance.

As the Committee's survey of marriage education in Australia indicates, assessment approaches have been increasingly utilised in the past decade, beginning with the introduction of PREPARE⁶⁴ to Australia in the 1980s, and FOCCUS⁶⁵ in 1991.

PREPARE – an abbreviation of PREmarital Personal And Relationship Evaluation – is complemented by: PREPARE MC (Marriage and Children) for couples planning marriage where one or both partners have children; ENRICH (Evaluation and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness), completed in 1981 and designed to assist married couples in enhancing their marital relationship; and MATE (Mature Age Transition Evaluation) designed for older couples to help them become more aware of those life changes or transition issues which could include marriage, relocation, employment change, health issues and/or retirement.

FOCCUS – an abbreviation of Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study – is complemented by: REFOCCUS (Relationships Enrichment Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study) developed in the late 1980s as a marriage enrichment instrument which a married couple can administer by themselves or use in a group setting.

PREPARE is the most extensively researched assessment program currently available. Premarital scores have predicted divorce and marital dissatisfaction with 80 – 85 per cent accuracy in two, three-year longitudinal studies of engaged couples.⁶⁶ Subsequent validation studies of the FOCCUS inventory produced similar results.⁶⁷

The inventories consist of a questionnaire to be completed by each person, the answers to which are then correlated and categorised. The PREPARE inventory involves a comprehensive assessment of a number of areas such as communication,

64 DH Olson, DG Fournier & JM Druckman (1989) *PREPARE, PREPARE MC, ENRICH inventories* Third edition Minneapolis MN: PREPARE/ENRICH Inc.

65 B Markey, M Micheletto & A Becker (1985) *Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study (FOCCUS)* Omaha: Archdiocese of Omaha.

66 AS Larson & DH Olson (1989) 'Predicting marital satisfaction using PREPARE: A replication study' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 15(3): 311–322; and BJ Fowers & DH Olson (1986) 'Predicting marital success with PREPARE: A predictive validity study' *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 12(4): 403–413. See also, BJ Fowers, KH Montel and DH Olson (1995) 'An examination of the predictive validity of an empirically based typology of engaged couples' *Threshold* 48: 8–13.

67 See 'The predictive validity of FOCCUS: A new five year study' (1994) *Threshold* 43: 9 for a summary of the study. See also, Centre for Marriage and Family (1995) *Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting it right* Omaha: Creighton University.

conflict resolution, parenting, religion, closeness, flexibility, self-confidence and assertiveness. In a similar manner, FOCCUS assesses the couple in categories including communication, conflict resolution, friends and interests, personality match and problem solving.

The following sample questions from the FOCCUS inventory asks each partner whether they agree, disagree or are unsure about these statements:

- My future spouse is a good listener
- We are in agreement about how we will combine both careers and child rearing
- My future spouse sometimes puts me down
- My future spouse and I are open to having children.

By completing the inventory and participating in a series of follow-up sessions with a trained facilitator, the couple is able to identify strengths in their relationship and to address matters which they either are concerned about or haven't discussed. The role of the educator is to facilitate discussion between the couple.

The inventory is a useful pre-marriage education tool for any couple because it gives an individual relationship profile, which the couple can then utilise as background knowledge when attending a subsequent group program: 'They already have an understanding of their strengths and the areas to which they need to pay added attention. This gives the couple clearer objectives when attending a group program.'⁶⁸ As couples are encouraged to discuss their responses to questions as soon as they have completed their individual questionnaires, FOCCUS author Dr Barbara Markey claims that 60 per cent of the value of the inventory lies in the couple simply completing it.⁶⁹

Particular couples may be more suited to an inventory style of pre-marriage education: 'A comprehensive marriage preparation service will offer a range of opportunities to couples, so that they may choose the opportunity(ies) best suited to their needs,' writes marriage educator Margaret Andrews:

As a guideline, the following couples may especially find the inventory more suitable: older couples; couples where one or both are entering a second marriage; couples where a child or children exist or the woman is pregnant; couples who express special concerns about the relationship; couples where one or both have a disability, for example a hearing impairment; couples where a language barrier exists; extenuating circumstances, for example living in different states or countries, or where work commitments preclude attendance at a group programme; and couples who, having completed a group programme, have issues they wish to explore further.⁷⁰

68 M Andrews (1996) *Marriage Education Training Programme: Inventory Overview* Melbourne: Threshold Publishing.

69 *ibid.*

70 *ibid.*

More recently the authors of the inventories have been developing skills training segments to accompany these assessment programs, so as to provide assistance to couples using the instruments.⁷¹ Some Australian agencies have also developed programs linking the facilitation of an inventory to a group information/skills program.⁷²

2. Information-awareness approaches

Many Australian marriage education programs grew out of an information-awareness model. Although the former didactic approach has been replaced by programs based on adult education models with a focus on experiential learning, the goal of couple self-awareness remains an important objective. Many programs today involve both information sharing, especially about topics such as financial issues, and awareness raising, particularly about expectations and attitudes, communication and conflict patterns, and understandings of each partner's family background and influences. Some programs combine these approaches with some skills training, although many only demonstrate skills rather than teach them.

As couples have been shown to relate better when they have more realistic expectations and beliefs,⁷³ the facilitation of programs in which couples examine the factors influencing their expectations and beliefs can be useful. The evaluation of informational classes at college level has shown changes evident in knowledge, mate selection, sexuality and conflict resolution attitudes, and communication and conflict resolution skills.⁷⁴

Australian pre-marriage programs typically involve couples in an exploration of their awareness of factors such as expectations of marriage, family of origin differences, communication patterns, conflict resolution approaches, and the changing patterns of the life cycle. Programs often include information sessions about financial issues and home buying, sexuality and family planning.

The internal evaluation of the program for the Attorney-General's Department concluded: 'It became evident that . . . in reality, current providers offered a very wide range of education-type activities which relate directly or indirectly to marriage and relationship education.'⁷⁵

71 PREPARE/ENRICH (1997) *PREPARE/ENRICH Newsletter* Minneapolis MN.

72 Ms Michele Simons, *Transcript*, p. 515.

73 RJ Eidelson & N Epstein (1981) 'Unrealistic belief of clinical couples: Their relationship to expectations, goals and satisfaction' *American Journal of Family Therapy* 9(4): 13-22.

74 SM Stanley et al (1997) 'Preventive Intervention for Couples' paper Denver: University of Denver.

75 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program: Final Report* Sydney.

In a recent article, Rev Tony Kerin, president of CSME suggested that ‘empowerment’ of couples is a primary objective of marriage education and enrichment:

The more I deal with other programs, analyse their content and compare them with what I do with FOCCUS and Engaged Encounter, the more I am tending to believe that the most substantial benefit common to any and all of these worthwhile courses is the way in which they instil an ‘ownership’, responsibility and empowerment concept where the participant couples gain control of their relationship and take personal charge of how it develops, how it is lived etc. This outcome is usually achieved by imparting not just skills, but confidence and assurance that comes from understanding the dynamics of their relationship, for example, how their family-of-origin affects their self image and relating capacity, conflict negotiation skills etc.⁷⁶

3. Skills training approaches

Skill training approaches focus on teaching couples to manage their lives better by actively teaching specific strategies for improved relationship functioning. A number of Australian programs incorporate aspects of skills training, especially around communication and conflict resolution issues. A number of skills training programs have been developed in the US, of which Relationships Enhancement, Couple Communication, and Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program are the best known.⁷⁷

Relationship Enhancement (RE), an empathy-building social learning program for 16–24 hours, is one of the most extensively tested skills building programs in existence. The program based on a Rogerian communication model shows impressive results for a wide variety of types of couples. While the program has been used for treating a wide array of problems, its use with premarital and marital couples that is in focus here. Related to this use, several treatment groups of college-age, dating couples gained significantly in empathy skills and problem solving skills from pre to post-test and relative to control groups.⁷⁸

One six-month follow-up found disclosure and empathy gains for RE participants relative to a lecture-discussion control group, while another found communication, but not problem-solving skills retention for experimental versus discussion group couples. Sustained gains in self-disclosure were not evident at follow-up in comparisons of participants and non-participants in another study. Heitland observed

76 T Kerin (1998) ‘What do you think you are doing in marriage education’ *Threshold* 58: 13.

77 The following description of the programs is taken from SM Stanley (1997) ‘Acting on what we know: The hope of prevention’ *Threshold* 56: 6–13.

78 B G Guerney (1977) *Relationship Enhancement* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See also <www.nire.org>

significant pre to post-test differences on listening, expression and problem-solving for college and high school participants in an eight hour RE workshop, relative to control group couples.⁷⁹ Meta-analytic research on many major marital programs found RE to have the strongest effect of those tested.

Like RE, *Couple Communication* (CC) is one of the older and best researched skills-based programs for couples.⁸⁰ While the program can be used in a variety of formats and settings, most of the outcome research on CC has studied the effects of the 12 hour, structured skills training program, with most samples being married couples from middle-class backgrounds. There is evidence suggesting the relevance of the material for couples at various stages and with various backgrounds originally developed CC to improve communication quality for couples. It is reported that small group participants valued self and other-awareness exercises and the climate of support emerging from the exercises. Studies also show clear gains in communication behaviour post training.

Reviewed studies of CC noted strong gains in communication quality following training, but also noted that these effects diminish over time. Gains in individual functioning and relationship quality are more durable, although the longest-term follow-up assessments are well less than a year in duration. CC is used by clergy, lay leaders, therapists, business personnel and chaplains in all branches of the US armed forces. Presenters of CC can use the approach individually with couples or in group settings.

Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) targets changes in attitudes and behaviour that are specifically related to risk and protective factors in a wide array of marital research. The rationale for PREP (and programs like it) are specifically supported by studies that predict marital success and failure; outcome research on program effects; and survey research on what couples say are the most relevant topics of prevention. With regard risks, PREP primarily targets those dimensions that are both highly predictive of marital success or failure and that are amenable to change (dynamic versus static factors).⁸¹

PREP offers a 12-hour sequence of mini-lectures, discussion and interpersonal skill practice in week-night, weekend or one-day formats. Topics of focus include communication, conflict management, forgiveness, religious beliefs and practices, expectations, fun and friendship. Also, strategies for enhancing and maintaining commitment have come to play an increasing larger role in the kinds of cognitive changes attempted in PREP. Both secular (or non sectarian) and Christian versions of

79 W Heitland (1986) 'An experimental communication program for premarital dating couples' *The School Counsellor*: 57-61.

80 S Miller et al (1991) 'Couple communication I' *Talking and Listening Together* Littleton Co: Interpersonal Communication Program Interpersonal Communication.

81 H Markman, S Stanley & SL Blumberg (1994) *Fighting for your marriage* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; and C Notarius & H Markman (1993) *We can work it out* New York: Perigee. See also <www.members.aol.com/prepinc/>

PREP are available. As is true of other programs, PREP is not exclusively focussed on skills-training. PREP also includes an extensive assessment focus in the form of in-depth exercises about expectations and beliefs that will affect marriages.

PREP has been more extensively researched regarding long-term effects than other programs – with most of the research using pre-marital couples. In a long-term study in Denver, program effects have been tracked using both self-report and observational coding of couple interaction. The following is a sampling of findings from this research project. Three years following intervention, the PREP couples maintained higher levels of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity than matched control couples. PREP participants demonstrated significantly more positive interaction up to four years post-intervention, including greater communication skill, support/validation, positive affect, positive escalation and overall positive communication relative to the control group. PREP couples also showed greater communication skill, positive affect and overall positive communication than couples who had declined the intervention years earlier. More significantly, clear group differences were obtained up to four years following intervention on negative communication patterns (eg withdrawal, denial, dominance, negative affects etc.), with PREP couples communicating less negatively than both matched control couples and decliner couples. These kinds of differences are very important, reports Professor Stanley, because such patterns are strongly correlated with marital distress, violence and break-up. The follow-ups with the Denver sample also revealed a statistically greater chance of pre-marital break-up among control group and decliner couples than PREP couples with similar, though non-statistically significant, trends for divorce and separation four to five years after training.

In a pre-post design using random assignment, Blumberg found PREP more effective than Engaged Encounter in building positive communication, problem-solving and support/validation behaviours at post-intervention. Similar research programs in Germany and Australia have demonstrated significant gains in communication, conflict management and satisfaction at post-test, with the former sample showing a maintenance of communication and satisfaction gains at one and three year follow-ups. Furthermore, the most recent data from the Germany project show that, at the five year follow-up, PREP couples have a divorce rate of 4 per cent versus 24 per cent for the control couples. However, interpretations of these results are problematic because PREP couples had been together significantly longer than controls, the PREP couples had been together an average of nine years before intervention (making generalisations to prevention difficult), and a differential drop-out rate led to the control couples being increasingly select for couples doing well over time.

A large scale National Institute of Mental Health supported research program is underway in Denver. It is designed to test the effectiveness of PREP as compared with other prevention programs, including conditions for testing PREP when given by clergy or lay leaders of religious organisations compared to university staff compared with naturally occurring interventions in religious organisations. The new research utilises a large sample, random assignment and plans long-term follow-up.

While the PREP program is used only by few couples in Australia,⁸² elements of the skills training approach are featured in many programs. This is also an area in which the field continues to develop. For example, PREP author, Dr Howard Markman, and Professor Halford, are key-note speakers for the 1998 national marriage education conference.⁸³

Conclusion

The Committee concludes that the provision of programs of marriage and relationship education is a valuable service to the community

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that there be a national strategy to strengthen marital relationships through programs of preventive education.

National survey of service providers

The Committee conducted a national survey of the provision of marriage education in Australia. Originally, the Committee had hoped that the Legal Aid and Family Services Office within the Attorney-General's Department would be able to provide it with detailed statistical information about the provision of family service programs, especially by the agencies which it funded, but this proved to be illusory. This is a matter of considerable concern to the Committee.

The results of the national survey are set out in Appendices D to N to this report. The following section is a summary of the analysis of the survey.

Overview and explanation of the survey

The survey was posted to all agencies funded by the Commonwealth Government, together with agencies affiliated with the Catholic Society for Marriage Education, the Marriage Educator's Association of Australia (formerly the Australian Association of Marriage Education) or agencies known to be offering marriage education programs. As such, the survey represents an underestimation of the amount of marriage education offered in Australia. For example, it is known that parishes and individual congregations within a number of Christian denominations offer local marriage

82 Professor Kim Halford, personal communication with the Chairman, 1998.

83 National Marriage Education Conference Committee, personal communication with the Chairman, May 1998.

education programs, which are not counted in this survey. It is also known that a few private providers offer marriage education.⁸⁴

The provision of marriage and relationship education is divided into a number of sections: pre-marriage education programs; inventories; post-wedding or enrichment programs; remarriage programs; stepfamily programs; separation programs; miscellaneous relationship education programs; and other programs. This categorisation was provided by individuals and agencies in the field, and represents the divisions commonly recognised. Hence pre-marriage programs typically involve one-two days or a series of evenings for engaged couples in which the usual topics include family backgrounds (called family-of-origin in the field); expectations of marriage; communication skills; and conflict resolution strategies.

Overall results

Participation by program type

	Number of participants	% of total
Pre-marriage education course	15,798	31.4
Pre-marriage inventory	24,154	46.9
Post wedding course	2,358	4.6
Post wedding inventory	2,414	4.9
Re-marriage course	252	0.5
Stepfamily course	187	0.4
Separation course	1,075	2.1
Misc. relationship education	3,374	6.6
Other relationship course	1,497	2.9
Total	51,486	100

Summary

- Some 40,000 individuals participated in either a pre-marriage education group program or a pre-marriage inventory (such as FOCCUS or PREPARE) in 1996–97.
- This represented 78 per cent of participants in surveyed programs.
- This is the equivalent of 20 per cent of all couples marrying in Australia.
- And 30 per cent of all couples marrying for the first time.
- This figure underestimates the total pre-wedding participation in marriage education, as some couples participated in general relationships education programs and some others attended programs not included in the survey, such as programs conducted by individual celebrants.
- Some 5,000 individuals participated in a post-wedding marriage enrichment program or undertook a post-wedding inventory (such as REFOCCUS or ENRICH).

84 For example, the Newman Jansen Institute in Sydney conducts a School of Marriage attended by a few hundred participants each year: *Transcript*, p. 963.

- This figure underestimates the total post-wedding education in Australia as the data from some organisations such as Marriage Encounter and Couples for Marriage Enrichment is incomplete.
- Nonetheless, it is estimated that for every ten couples who participate in pre-marriage education, only one participates in a post-wedding marriage enrichment program.

Pre-marriage group education

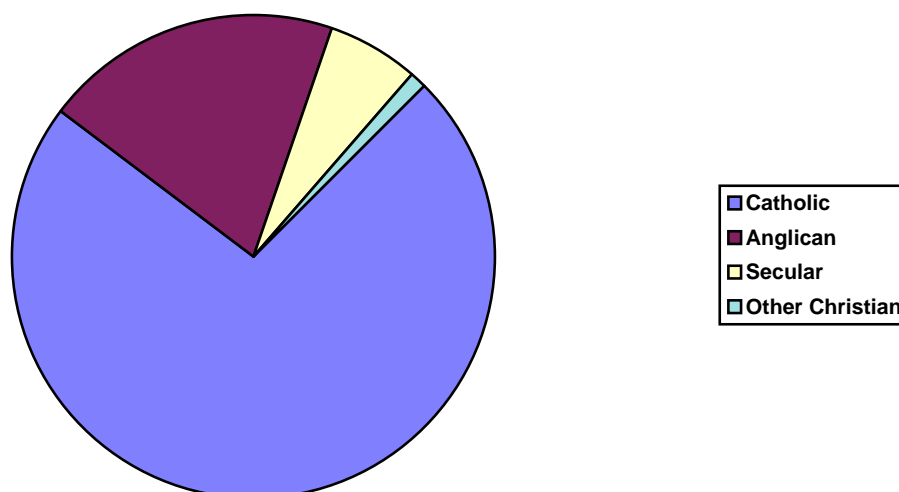
1. Pre-marriage education group programs

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	3,180	1,770	982,560
New South Wales	6,240	2,620.5	3,129,790
Queensland	2,432	1,404	986,630
South Australia	780	567	157,426
Western Australia	1,828	571.5	292,553
Tasmania	312	240	17,616
ACT	988	104	102,752
NT	38	24	480
Total	15,798	7,264.5	5,669,806

Participation by provider type

Participation by provider affiliation



Summary

- Some 8,000 couples (16,000 participants) attended a pre-marriage education group program covered by the survey in 1996–97.

- This figure slightly underestimates the total participation on pre-marriage programs, as the survey was not able to measure the numbers of people participating in local parish-based programs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when these participants and those attending the few private providers are added to the numbers, approximately 18,000 people participated in group programs.
- This represented about 8.5 per cent of couples marrying in Australia.
- And about 13 per cent of couples marrying for the first time.
- Of the participants covered by the survey, 73 per cent attended programs conducted by agencies affiliated or associated with the Catholic Church.
- 21 per cent attended programs affiliated or associated with other Christian Churches (of which 20 per cent attended Anglican agency programs).
- Only 6.2 per cent attended group programs conducted by non-church secular agencies (many of this number attended programs conducted by one agency).
- Of people marrying in the Catholic church, approximately 35 per cent participated in a group program.
- Of people marrying in the Anglican church, approximately 15 per cent participated in a group program.
- Of people whose wedding was celebrated by other Christian ministers and non-Christian religious ministers, approximately 1 per cent participated in a group program.
- Of people being married by a civil celebrant or in a Registry, approximately 1 per cent participated in a group program.

The statistics are approximate because there is some circumstances when couples attend a program conducted by an agency other than that associated with the church in which the couple intend to marry. As this is not a frequent occurrence, the overall proportions of service delivery are generally accurate.

2. Pre-marriage inventories

Use of couple inventories

	FOCCUS	PREPARE	PREPARE MC
Couples	4,500	6,513	1,064

Summary

- Some 12,077 couples (24,154 people) undertook a pre-marriage inventory in the period 1996–97 covered by the survey.
- This represented about 11 per cent of couples marrying in Australia.
- And about 17 per cent of couples marrying for the first time.
- Of the participants covered by the survey, almost all attended a facilitator working for or associated with a church-affiliated marriage education agency.
- Of people marrying in the Catholic church, approximately 23 per cent undertook a pre-marriage inventory.

- Of people marrying in other Christian churches, 26 per cent undertook a pre-marriage inventory. (Although precise data is not available, it is believed that most of these were marrying in the Anglican church).
- Of couples being married by a civil celebrant or in a Registry Office, very few undertook a pre-marriage inventory.

3. Other relationship courses

See miscellaneous relationship courses and other courses, below.

Post wedding marriage enrichment

1. Post wedding marriage enrichment courses

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria*	780	339	209,203
New South Wales	562	392.5	24,302
Queensland	96	24	35,716
South Australia	376	287.5	13,440
Western Australia	112	-	-
Tasmania	-	-	-
ACT	-	-	-
NT	-	-	-
National program#	432	337.5	91,575
Total	2,358	2,506	373,674

Notes

* The data for Victoria includes 652 participants attending courses conducted by one agency.

Retrouvaille, and Uniting Church of Australia

Summary

- Some 1,179 couples (2,358 participants) attended post-wedding marriage enrichment programs covered by the survey in 1996–97.
- This figure underestimates the total attendance at post-wedding marriage enrichment programs, as programs conducted by the national group Couples for Marriage Enrichment Australia (CMEA) were not available.

2. Post-wedding inventories

	RE-FOCCUS	ENRICH
Couples	350 (approximate)	857

Summary

- Some 1,200 couples (2,400 participants) undertook a post-wedding marriage inventory in the survey period of 1996–97.

Re-marriage programs

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	12	22	122
New South Wales	175	287	15,956
Queensland	18	24	432
South Australia	38	37.5	1,425
Western Australia	-	-	-
Tasmania	9	6	108
ACT	-	-	-
NT	-	-	-
Total	252	376.5	18,043

Summary

- Some 252 participants attended re-marriage courses in the survey year.
- This represented just 0.36 per cent of marriages where one or both partners were marrying for a second or subsequent time.

Step-family courses

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	52	48	2,496
New South Wales	62	84	5,208
Queensland	18	12	216
South Australia	-	-	-
Western Australia	55	51	1,707
Tasmania	-	-	-
ACT	-	-	-
NT	-	-	-
Total	187	185	9,627

Summary

- Some 187 people attended step-family courses in the 1996–97 year.

Separation courses

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	44	66	946
New South Wales	420	122	17,471
Queensland	102	88	5,812
South Australia	157	315	26,300
Western Australia	133	170	7,700
Tasmania	204	74	3,028
ACT	15	3	45
NT	-	-	-
Total	1,075	838	61,302

Summary

- Some 1075 people participated in separation courses in the year 1996–97.
- Of these, 536 (or 50 per cent) attended courses conducted by secular agencies.
- And 539 (50 per cent) attended courses conducted by church agencies.

Relationship programs

1. Miscellaneous relationship programs

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	353	170.25	3,249
New South Wales	611	685.5	20,864
Queensland	474	70	4,452
South Australia	1,237	197.5	71,306
Western Australia	687	301.5	12,987.5
Tasmania	12	12	144
ACT	-	-	-
NT	-	-	-
Total	3,374	1,376.75	113,002.5

Summary

- Some 3,374 people attended a range of relationship programs in 1996-97.
- Of these, 2,773 people (82 per cent) attended courses conducted by secular agencies.
- And 601 people (18 per cent) attended courses conducted by church agencies.

2. Other courses

Participation by State and Territory

	Participants	Course hours	Participant hours
Victoria	98	137.5	10,541
New South Wales	650	318	12,188
Queensland	-	-	-
South Australia	632	281	10,809.5
Western Australia	77	12	924
Tasmania	-	-	-
ACT	40	20	340
NT	-	-	-
Total	1,497	769	34,802.5

Summary

- Some 1,497 people participated in other relationship courses in 1996–97 (See Appendix N).
- Of these, 777 people (51.9 per cent) attended courses conducted by secular agencies.
- And 720 (48.1 per cent) attended courses conducted by church agencies.

The role of prevention

The central purpose of the marriage and relationship education program is prevention. According to the guidelines issued by the Attorney-General's Department, the specific purpose is to:

... provide preventive programs which focus on providing information and skills to foster positive stable relationships. Trained educators provide guidance and support prior to and during marriage (and remarriage) with the aim of promoting healthy and stable relationships, thus reducing the possibility of breakdown and trauma associated with separation and divorce.⁸⁵

The program guidelines include both *de jure* and *de facto* marital relationships. In 1997, the name of the program was changed from 'marriage/relationship' education to 'marriage and relationship education' to reflect this fact.

The Committee considers that the funding of marriage education agencies and organisations should be made according to the criteria established in the guidelines, that is specifically, to be preventive in nature, with the aim of building healthy stable marital relationships. An analysis of the surveys returned to the Committee by the funded agencies and a consideration of their course descriptions suggests that in some instances the programs for which agencies have been funded are outside the purpose of the program or are of marginal significance.

The rationale for the program can be found in the *Marriage Act 1961*⁸⁶ and the *Family Law Act 1975*⁸⁷ and in the dual purposes of:

- Promoting the benefits that can accrue to adults and children (in terms of enhanced educational, mental and physical health outcomes) through promotion of and support for satisfying and stable marriage and family life; and
- Avoiding the distress caused by the breakdown of marital relationships.

It is notable that the emphasis is on prevention rather than therapy. Few, if any couples, enter marriage with the attitude that this is just a temporary arrangement. They aspire to a long, supportive life together. For the most part, they are caring, loving people with enormous goodwill towards each other. Their relationships are healthy and hopefilled. But, as the noted marital educator and author, Harville Hendrix, writes:

Marriage is not a static state between two unchanging people. Marriage is a psychological and spiritual journey that begins in the ecstasy of attraction,

85 Commonwealth of Australia, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra.

86 Section 9C.

87 Section 43 (a) and (b).

meanders through a rocky stretch of self-discovery, and culminates in the creation of an intimate, joyful, lifelong union. Whether or not you realise the full potential of this vision depends not on your ability to attract the perfect mate, but on your willingness to acquire knowledge about hidden parts of yourself.⁸⁸

Other marriage educators point to research that indicates that understanding different but normal family backgrounds,⁸⁹ clarifying expectations of the relationship, and developing good communication patterns⁹⁰ are important factors in marital satisfaction and survival. David and Vera Mace, pioneers of marriage education in both the US and Australia, suggested that there are three requirements for a successful marriage:

- A commitment to growth, sincerely entered into by husband and wife;
- An effective communication system, and the necessary skills to use it; and
- The ability to accept marital conflict positively, and resolve it creatively.⁹¹

While the approaches to strengthening marriage vary, there is a common factor: that awareness of backgrounds and differences, and good communication patterns can help almost all relationships. Very few marital relationships are so pathologically distressed from the outset that they are doomed to failure.

The primary objective of marriage and relationship education is support for functional, healthy relationships, all of which involve a journey of self and other discovery. Various educators have described the journey in different language. FOCCUS author, Dr Barbara Markey, writes of the three stages of infatuation, reality-testing and intimacy.⁹² Susan Campbell describes five stages of romance, power struggle, stability, commitment and co-creation.⁹³ Harville Hendrix speaks of romantic love, the power struggle and a conscious marriage.⁹⁴ The common thread in these and other works about marriage is the idea that couples invariably move from a state of romantic love to a struggle between them and, if successful to a state of intimacy. Common to the many programs of marriage education is the understanding that it is not compatible views which are ultimately important in determining marital stability, but the manner in which couples work out their differences.⁹⁵

88 Harville Hendrix (1988) *Getting the love you want* Melbourne: Schwartz & Wilkinson xiv.

89 H Anderson & R Cotton Fite (1993) *Becoming married* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox.

90 J Gottman (1994) *Why marriages succeed or fail* London: Bloomsbury.

91 D Mace & V Mace (1977) *How to have a happy marriage* Nashville TN: Abington.

92 B Markey (1989) 'Building eight marriages with the same spouse: Is it possible? Is it healthy?' in FN Meis (ed) *Life-long marriage: Is it possible?* Overland Park KS: M&M 14.

93 SM Campbell (1980) *The couple's journey* San Luis Obispo CA: Impact.

94 H Hendrix supra.

95 See for example, John Gottman supra.

Hence preventive marriage education involves the improvement of awareness, information and skills through the gaining of interpersonal competence and functioning as partners in an intimate relationship.⁹⁶

Two important consequences flow from this understanding. First, marriage and relationship education is not primarily therapeutic in orientation.⁹⁷ It is not counselling, but an educative process. As the Australian Association for Marriage Education and the Catholic Society for Marriage Education stated in 1993:

Marriage education is seen to be essentially different from marriage counselling in that it focuses on the development of the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to build and maintain relationships, as opposed to counselling which has as its primary orientation the solution of specific emotional problems presented by the clients.⁹⁸

This distinction was reiterated in a number of submissions to the inquiry.⁹⁹ One family service agency reported that:

One of the major difficulties in the area of education is breaking down the perception that couples who are attending courses have problems with their relationships. There needs to be education so that people can understand the difference between relationship education and counselling. This is particularly relevant where the community is small and anonymity is non-existent and privacy difficult to maintain.¹⁰⁰

The 'confusion that exists between the concepts of counselling and education' was remarked upon in the recent research about community attitudes undertaken for the Attorney-General's Department. The report advised on the need to avoid the strengthening of people's beliefs that relationship education is only for couples who experience problems.¹⁰¹

Dr Roger Harris, co-author of the Australian marriage education studies, spoke of attitudinal barriers to marriage education:

In trying to explore those attitudinal barriers, we came across a lot of ways of expressing that, such as: 'We do not need it; we are okay. Is it really marriage

96 See, L L'Abate (1990) *Building family competence* Newbury Park CA: Sage 7.

97 B Guerney (1997) *Marriage education: Past, present and future* Washington DC: Family Impact Seminar.

98 'Definition of marriage education' (1993) *Threshold* 39: 4.

99 See for example, Kinway, *Submissions*, p. S704.

100 Lutheran Community Care, *Submissions*, p. S414.

101 Donovan Research *supra*.

counselling we are going to and not marriage education?’ – there is a good deal of confusion about that, because in the public mind it tends to be counselling.¹⁰² The distinction has also been recognised from a marriage counselling perspective. In their evaluation of the marriage counselling program, AIFS researchers Ilene Wolcott and Helen Glezer, cite Sprenkle (1980) as maintaining that ‘the unifying concept underlying the field of marital therapy is the “emphasis on treating problems within a relationship context”’.¹⁰³ They quote Mr Len Harvey, the Principal Psychologist with the Psychology and Counselling Section of the Attorney-General’s Department as summarising the parliament’s objectives with the Family Law Act ‘to encourage the development of marriage counselling organisations so that people with marital difficulties might have an alternative to divorce.’¹⁰⁴ Wolcott and Glezer conclude:

Marriage counselling as defined in the Family Law Act, by marriage theorists and in descriptions of agency aims and objectives, encompasses not just the common connotation of helping to prevent divorce through the enhancement of the marital relationship, but also the role of assisting couples to mitigate the consequences of divorce where divorce has been considered a necessary or inevitable decision.¹⁰⁵

They proceed to outline the various therapeutic approaches to counselling in the next section of the evaluation.¹⁰⁶

The Committee believes that a clear distinction between preventive marital education and therapeutic counselling should be maintained in government policy and funding guidelines.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Family Relationships Services Program clearly recognise in its objectives and funding mechanisms the programs of prevention (marriage and relationship education, and family skills training), as distinct from programs of therapy, counselling and mediation.

Secondly, marriage and relationship education is about couples. As the authors of the Australian study, *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* observed: ‘The emphasis in all definitions [of marriage education] on the use of the word “couple” is noteworthy, suggesting that marriage education has as its main focus couples rather than individual learners.’¹⁰⁷ This emphasis flows in part from the significance of marriage, and from

102 Dr Roger Harris, *Transcript*, p. 505.

103 I Wolcott & H Glezer (1989) *Marriage Counselling in Australia* Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies 24.

104 *ibid.* 25.

105 *id.*

106 *ibid.* 26.

107 R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia 8.

the fact that the marriage and relationship education program 'is administered in accordance with the Marriage Act 1961.'¹⁰⁸

The Committee notes that the description of the program is 'marriage and relationship education.' Different views have been expressed about the use of the word 'relationships' as distinct from marriage. Some seek more inclusive terminology. The Donovan team noted that 'the name "marriage and relationship education" was either rejected or received lukewarm reaction from most customers in the qualitative research.'¹⁰⁹ The preference was for 'lighter, more contemporary names, with suggestions such as "Life Skills", "Relating Better," "Living Together" and so forth.' The Committee notes that a number of agencies have changed their title and course names to reflect this notion.

On the other hand, the Jansen Newman Institute, probably the most successful private provider of marriage and relationship education in the nation, has returned to using the word 'marriage' rather than 'relationships.' Dr Jansen and Mrs Newman told the Committee that the 'use of the word "marriage" as opposed to "relationship" suggests to us the idea of permanence as opposed to the notion of relationship, which in our present day culture in Australia has strong connotations of transience.'¹¹⁰ They told the Committee that they had changed the name of their program from 'School of Marriage' to the 'Really Relating workshop' but it 'did not attract nearly the interest.'¹¹¹ As a consequence the Institute has reverted to the name 'School of Marriage' for its courses which attract both people intending to marry and those in de facto relationships.

While the Committee recognises that agencies will choose names that they consider best reflect their approach to programs, there is an issue involved which extends beyond semantics. As Michele Simons, co-author of the two Australian studies of marriage education, told the Committee:

Marriage education . . . has a strong preventative focus. That means that if it is being done well it is very much underpinned by an understanding of what are the factors that contributes to marital breakdown – not relationship breakdown but marital breakdown . . .

Relationship education may still carry that preventative focus but it is not targeted towards marriage. It may not be. It may be targeted more broadly to relationship skills which may be communication skills. Sometimes I have the impression that, with relationship and marriage education, the terms are used synonymously and that strong preventative focus has perhaps been lost in terms of preventing marital breakdown . . .

108 Attorney-General's Department, *Submissions*, p. S949.

109 Donovan Research *supra* 7.

110 Jansen Newman Institute, *Submissions*, p. S1289.

111 Ms Margaret Newman, *Transcript*, p. 966.

We need to be guarded about using the terms synonymously. We really need to go to very much the core of saying: what is the purpose of this program? Is it to prevent marital breakdown? Is it the focus of the participants' marriage in some shape or form, whether they are married or contemplating marriage or moving into marriage? Or is it just general relationship skills that they are seeking to enhance their quality of life? . . .

We need to be clear about what services are being provided and, as such, if we are on about promoting and enhancing the stability of marriage, that that is different from the general promotion of relationship skills within the population more broadly.¹¹²

The Committee notes that relationship skills are relevant in a variety of circumstances, for example, between co-workers or single people sharing accommodation. However, the Committee believes that the marriage and relationship education program should maintain its focus on marital relationships (whether *de jure* or *de facto*). For example, maintaining marital relationships as the primary focus of the educational process can assist a couple to discern whether it is appropriate to take the step they are considering. This acknowledges that some relationships are not satisfactory and it is preferable that breakdown occurs before, rather than after marriage and the birth of children.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the emphasis on the marital relationship should remain the focus of the marriage and relationship education program.

The Committee believes that the objectives of all programs and courses conducted by agencies should be clearly indicated in the outline of the programs or courses.

The Committee notes the research findings about the importance of life transitions in adult education. It notes that three life transitions are particularly relevant to preventive education: marrying; the birth of the first child; and separation/re-partnering.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the priority areas for marriage and relationship education relate to three life transition events, namely: marriage; the birth of the first child; and separation/re-partnering.

112 Ms Michele Simons, *Transcript*, pp. 506–507.

Funding

The historical basis of funding

Section 9C(1) of the *Marriage Act 1961* provides that: ‘A voluntary organisation may apply to the Minister for approval under this Part as an organisation conducting programs of marriage education.’ A marriage is defined in section 43 of the Family Law Act as: ‘. . . union of a man and woman to the exclusion of all others voluntarily entered into for life’. This definition follows the common law definition of marriage as: ‘The voluntary union for life of one man with one woman to the exclusion of all others.’¹¹³

In guidelines issued by the Attorney-General’s Department in 1986 for voluntary organisations seeking approval as organisations conducting programs of marriage education, it was stated that:

. . . for the purposes of determining which programs will attract financial assistance, ‘marriage education’ will include educative programs directed primarily towards persons planning marriage, a de facto relationship or remarriage, thinking seriously about entering such a state, functioning effectively within it or choosing to leave it. Proposed programs aimed at persons leaving marriage will normally be expected to focus on future relationships.

Subsequent guidelines included the following definition: ‘Marriage Education is operationally defined as a process where a neutral third party, focussed on preventing family disharmony and enhancing family harmony, assists parties to develop skills to deal with the stresses they may encounter as they move into, live within or move out of the family unit.’

The primary focus of Commonwealth funding of marriage education on marriage not only derives from the *Marriage Act 1961* – ‘An Act relating to Marriage’ – but also from the Second Reading Speech of the then Attorney-General, Sir Garfield Barwick, when introducing the legislation which, in part, provided for the provision of funds for marriage education: ‘This bill . . . endeavours to ensure that our people – particularly our young people – enter into marriage, in the familiar and eloquent words, not lightly but advisedly.’¹¹⁴

In the debate on the related Matrimonial Causes Bill, the Attorney-General said: ‘One of the great foundations of our national life is the family, and in turn the family is founded on marriage. National interest is best served and family life is best nurtured when marriage is truly life-long.’¹¹⁵

113 See *Hyde v Hyde and Woodmansee* (1886) LR IP&D 130,133 per Lord Penzance.

114 *Hansard* 19 May 1960: 2007.

115 *Hansard* 14 May 1959: 2224.

This general theme is reflected in the sub-program guidelines. According to the guidelines, the specific purpose of the marriage and relationship education program is to:

provide preventive programs which focus on providing information and skills to foster positive stable relationships. Trained educators provide guidance and support prior to and during marriage (and remarriage) with the aim of promoting healthy and stable relationships, thus reducing the possibility of breakdown and trauma associated with separation and divorce.¹¹⁶

The objectives of the funding are clear: to educate people for harmonious, healthy and stable marital relationships.

Current funding

The Commonwealth Government has provided grants to approved organisations offering marriage education programs since 1976. By 1996–97, 46 programs were in receipt of grants from the Attorney-General's department. The value of the grants ranged from \$9,672 to \$178,876. The estimated grants for 1997–98 ranged from a low of \$10,160 to a high of \$209,496. The grants were made originally on a historical basis, that is, those agencies in receipt of marriage counselling funding were funded also to provide marriage education. Over the years, a number of other agencies were also funded. Since 1995, funding has been subject to a tender process, following the determination of areas in need of service by the Department.¹¹⁷

The Attorney-General's Department informed the Committee that since 1994 'very clear assessment criteria have been in place in relation to the selection of service delivery organisations for new funding' as recommended by the Industry Commission into community social welfare organisations.¹¹⁸

This merit based process for allocating funding has been well received by the peak bodies and organisations applying for funding and is acknowledged as a highly accountable and thorough process of assessment.¹¹⁹

The Committee's survey of the provision of services and analysis of the funding reveals a highly unsatisfactory funding scheme.

116 Attorney General's Department, Legal Aid and Family Services, Family Services Program Guidelines, Canberra.

117 Attorney-General's Department, *Submissions*, pp. S964–S967.

118 *ibid.* S964.

119 *ibid.* S965.

In the internal evaluation of the marriage and relationship education program, the consultants Keys Young noted that the costs per participant ranged from a low of \$9.57 to a high of \$1,016 in 1996. The evaluation stated: 'There is certainly some substantial variation in costs between organisations apparently delivering similar services, to a similar client group, in a similar service delivery environment.'¹²⁰ Elsewhere, the consultants noted cross-subsidisation of programs: '. . . it appears more typical for funds to be pooled and for organisations to reallocate resources according to their own priorities.'¹²¹ Other than suggesting a review of the funding processes, disappointingly the consultants offered no proposals as to how these discrepancies should be overcome.

Other submissions to the Committee noted the funding problems. In relation to funding for counselling services, the Sydney Anglican Counselling Centre stated:

In 1990, each agency was given a 20 per cent increase in their base grant. Those with the biggest grants received huge increases and were able to expand and develop in a significant way. Agencies, doing a similar amount of counselling but with a lower grant, were not able to expand and develop in the same way. The more an agency 'had' the more it received. This was not an equitable basis for funding . . .

In the present situation, one agency may be counselling 8,000 hours and receives a grant of \$340,000; another, counselling the same number of hours, receives \$765,000, while another agency, counselling 16,000 hours, receives several millions of dollars.¹²²

Fr Clem Kilby, Director of Centacare Family Services in Tasmania, informed the Committee that there was considerable inequity in funding of family relationship services in his State.¹²³

A marriage educator, Bruce Findlay, told the Committee: 'The present method of funding agencies needs to be more transparent, to convince practitioners that it is equitable, or at least effective.'¹²⁴

In discussions with the Committee, representatives of the Attorney-General's Department acknowledged the vast discrepancies in funding.¹²⁵

120 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of the Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program: Final Report* Sydney: 93.

121 *ibid.* 56.

122 Anglican Marriage Education and Counselling Services, *Submissions*, p. S124.

123 Fr Clem Kilby, *Transcript*, p. 88.

124 Mr Bruce Findlay, *Submissions*, p. S112.

125 Dr Margaret Browne, *Transcript*, p. 1007.

In order to test the provision of funds against services provided, the committee examined a number of criteria, including the number of participants in programs, the funds per participant, the funds per course hour, and the funds per participant hour. All measures revealed great discrepancies in funding that cannot be justified in the expenditure of public monies.

The results of this analysis are set out in appendices D, E and F to this report. The following examples reveal the discrepancies. In each case, the following commentary leaves aside the position of unfunded agencies.

Funding per participant

Commonwealth funding per participant ranged from a low of \$7.80 to a high of \$1,048.33. Leaving aside newly established services, for which fewer participants might be expected initially, the variation in funding, as revealed in Appendix F, is unacceptable.

Funding per course hour

When Commonwealth funding to agencies was measured per course hour, the range was from \$23.77 to \$3,292.00. Leaving this high figure aside, as it involved a newly established service in a regional city, the range still extended from \$23 to over \$900. The variation is likely to be greater if the provision of pre-marriage inventories is also counted in the calculations. The details for all agencies is set out in Appendix D.

Funding per participant hour

Commonwealth funding per participant hour was equally varied, ranging from just four cents to a high of \$205.75. Even leaving aside the highest figure, the range was from four cents per participant hour to over \$10 per participant hour for a number of agencies. The variation is likely to be greater if the provision of pre-marriage inventories is also included in the calculations. The details are set out in Appendix E.

These calculations are based on the figures for 1996–97. The Committee notes that funding for some agencies has been further increased for 1997–98.¹²⁶ Anecdotal evidence provided to the Committee suggests that there has not been a substantial change in the number of participants in 1997–98. The Committee believes that calculations based on 1997–98 data are unlikely to reveal any improvement in the situation and will possibly reveal even greater discrepancies.

126 Legal Aid and Family Services (1998) *1997–98 estimated total payments for FRSP organisations*.

The Committee has noted the development of the FAMQIS project, including references to funding contracts in the various reports. The Committee believes that while the development of FAMQIS provides a useful element of quality assurance, especially through the introduction of the FAMnet, it fails to establish a service-delivery based funding scheme that will deliver equity to the system. Indeed, the Committee believes the FAMQIS proposals in relation to funding arrangements will entrench inequities in the Family Relationships Services Program.

It is the Committee's view that the system of funding is grossly inequitable and fundamentally flawed and that a new transparent and service-delivery based funding scheme for marriage and relationship education should be implemented forthwith.

Recommendation 5

The Committee concludes that the system of funding the marriage and relationship education program reveals major inequities and recommends that it be rectified as a matter of urgency.

In the following section, the Committee examines various approaches to funding.

Approaches to promoting marriage and relationship education

1. Levels of intervention

One approach described in public health literature involves three broad prevention strategies of primary, secondary and tertiary intervention.¹²⁷ In their evaluation for the Attorney-General's Department, Keys Young described the content of these levels as: primary prevention (targeting all couples for intervention), secondary intervention (targeting couples at high risk of marital problems) and tertiary intervention (targeting couples with existing difficulties):

Depending upon the targets of the program, the type, timing, intensity and level of intervention will necessarily vary. Thus, for example, minimal levels of intervention (such as mass media education or self directed programs) may work at the primary level of intervention, but are unlikely to be effective at the tertiary level with couples who have pre-existing problems or difficulties. Similarly, extended sessions of education and/or skills training may be unnecessary and not cost effective at the primary level of intervention, but may be cost-efficient and effective for more 'distressed couples'. In other words, 'it's horses for courses': the level and intensity of intervention will vary according

127 WK Halford and BC Behrens (1996) 'Prevention of marital difficulties' in P Cotton and HJ Jackson (eds) *Early intervention and Preventative interventions in mental health applications of clinical psychology* Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society 35.

to the target group, and the stage in the relationship dynamics, in particular whether the couple is at risk of, or already experiencing, marital conflict.¹²⁸

The Committee notes that this approach has its origins in a clinical model of well-being. As Coie et al write:

The primary objective of prevention science is to trace the links between generic risk factors and specific clinical disorders and to moderate the pervasive effects of risk factors. If generic risks can be identified and altered in a population, this can have a positive influence on a range of mental health problems, as well as job productivity, and can reinforce the need for many health, social and correctional services.¹²⁹

This is to be contrasted with the educational approach outlined by Bernard Guerney¹³⁰ which has informed the development of marriage and relationship education in Australia.¹³¹ Halford and Behrens suggest that 'a combination of primary prevention using minimal intervention, and secondary prevention using brief skills-based interventions are most likely to be effective' although conceding that 'there is limited empirical evidence to guide our choice of optimal intervention strategies for the prevention of marital distress.'¹³² Cost is the central factor in Halford and Behrens approach:

Given the high prevalence of marital distress, it would seem that almost all couples could potentially benefit from marital distress prevention. However, the skills training approach we have been advocating currently involves four to six sessions with highly skilled trainers. Given limited resources, this approach to primary prevention may be too expensive.

This conclusion overlooks a number of important developments in marriage and relationship education in Australia. First, as the Committee's survey has found, a large proportion of couples marrying for the first time participate in marriage preparation programs. While one sector of the population, namely those marrying civilly have been neglected, the Australian experience indicates that universal marriage education is a realistic objective. Secondly, this target is achievable for a relatively low cost, especially when compared to the cost of marital breakdown. Thirdly, the Keys Young evaluation is notable for giving almost no attention to the considerable growth in inventory programs over the past decade. This is a major oversight. Fourthly, research increasingly indicates that all couples can benefit from education. As Professor Luciano L'Abate, whose work on prevention is well-known,

128 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program: Final Report* Sydney: 34 and 146.

129 JD Coie et al (1993) 'The science of prevention' *American Psychologist* 48: 1013-1022.

130 B Guerney *supra*.

131 R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

132 WK Halford & BC Behrens *supra* 38.

this role of primary prevention is central to marriage education: 'It is known that dysfunctional patterns are passed on from generation to generation through family lines. Primary prevention means breaking these patterns before they appear.'¹³³ Finally, the Committee is of the opinion that an educational approach is preferable and more in tune with Australian culture.¹³⁴ Australians do not generally use the expression 'mental health' in the same way that Americans do. Moreover, marriage education assumes a degree of normalcy in relationship function. Couples, for example, already possess certain communication skills that can be enhanced.

A number of family services agencies supported a universal approach to education. In its submission, Relationships Australia stated:

Relationship support services should not be limited to couples experiencing difficulties. All couples could benefit from services to support and enhance their relationship.¹³⁵

The Catholic Society for Marriage Education wrote:

No one has ever been harmed by participating in a marriage education program. All couples wishing to marry benefit from marriage preparation. . .¹³⁶

The Committee concludes that the description of three different levels of intervention does not provide an adequate basis for the funding of marriage education. Moreover, the Committee supports the aspiration for universal marriage and relationship education.

2. An integrated approach to family services

In its submission to the inquiry, the Attorney-General's Department informed the Committee that the Department was proposing a more flexible approach to the funding of service organisations. This approach would involve negotiations about the services to be delivered by the agency.¹³⁷

A similar suggestion was made by the major service providers in Victoria in hearings before the Committee:

133 T Snelgrove (1988) 'Prevention is a mission in search of a profession' *BC Council for the Family Newsletter* 6, reporting Professor L'Abate's presentation to the British Columbia Marriage Preparation Conference.

134 HN Higginbotham, SG West and DR Forsyth (1988) *Psychotherapy and behaviour change: Social, cultural and methodological perspectives* New York: Pergamon Press. The authors note that an effective approach in one culture might be less successful or rejected entirely in another.

135 Relationships Australia, *Submissions*, p. S1121.

136 Catholic Society for Marriage Education, *Submissions*, p. S935.

137 Helen Hambling, *Transcript*, p. 1010.

We also see community development and provision for both integration and flexibility across subprograms as vital for the delivery of relevant and effective services . . . We talked a lot about how unhelpful it is to have arbitrary divisions between the education and the counselling programs particularly. Increasingly, in our education work we are acknowledging that we probably will have about 20 per cent of the group actually needing some individual counselling as a result of the educative process¹³⁸

Relationships Australia recommended that ‘an integrated, client focussed approach to service provision and referral should be the focus of service delivery, not administrative structure.’¹³⁹

When questioned by the Committee, the Department insisted that although sub-programs would not be treated as discretely as in the past, funds for each sub-program would still be identified. In evidence to the Committee about proposed new contractual arrangements with agencies, Ms Helen Hambling from the Family Services Program said:

. . . in the contract we will agree – the Commonwealth and the organisation – on the range of activities, the range of client benefits or the number of clients. There are a number of different bases on which we can agree, but it would be much clearer – the contract between the Commonwealth and the organisation on what our expectation is in terms of what they deliver.

If, for example, an agency were to say, ‘Look, it is all too hard to do that preventive stuff. We have got six to eight weeks waiting lists for counselling’ – and this is actually not that far from the truth – ‘it is hard to attract people into preventive programs. Really we just prefer to ditch all that and focus on this other.’ From our perspective, we would be saying, ‘I’m sorry, but the government needs a preventive focus in this area, so if you want to be funded through this program, this is the sort of arrangement that we need.’

That is not to say that we might not be able to look at some more specialisation within regions. I am hoping that through this new data system we will have a considerably clearer picture of what is being delivered where and we would be able to be more flexible. If an agency says, ‘Look, we are an agency that everybody associates with a crisis or with problems, and all the research is telling us that people do not like to go for a preventive service to somewhere that has a problem focus when down the road there is another service that is not in the problem field’, that is the sort of arrangement that we ought to be able to incorporate into the new process.¹⁴⁰

138 *Transcript*, pp. 194–195.

139 Relationships Australia, *Submissions*, p. S1122.

140 Ms Helen Hambling, *Transcript*, pp. 1010–1011.

This approach was identified in more detail in the FAMQIS project:

In some circumstances, a contract could 'tie down' a transaction in detail, and include specifications for resource usage and service type, as well as specification of client numbers or client benefits. In other circumstances, a contract could focus on clients and client benefits, and be silent as to expenditure categories or even service type.¹⁴¹

While the Committee notes the assurance that funding for education and counselling services would be separately identified, it remains concerned about the proposal. First, as Ms Hambling noted, there is pressure within agencies to fund crisis related therapy and counselling, especially with 6–8 week waiting periods.¹⁴² Upon questioning, the Victorian agencies conceded that they were free under current arrangements to refer participants in education programs for counselling if the need arose.¹⁴³ The Committee has already noted evidence that suggests cross-subsidisation and cost-shifting arrangements that current accounting procedures appear not to reveal. The Committee is concerned that the evidence from some service providers suggested that they should be able to provide counselling for example, with funds allocated for education.¹⁴⁴ The new FAMQIS system will not change this situation, as it merely provides a record of service delivery according to the parameters established by the Department. Indeed the Community Link Report, quoted above, envisages the pooling of funds. Secondly, some agencies have experienced difficulties in attracting participants to preventive education programs. The combination of these pressures is detrimental to maintaining and expanding preventive programs.

Thirdly, there is evidence that preventive programs suffer by association with therapy and counselling.¹⁴⁵ David Mace, a pioneer of marriage enrichment and education in the UK, US and Australia,¹⁴⁶ wrote about two powerful social taboos in the field of marriage: the notions that relationships are entirely private and natural. As marriage educator Margaret Andrews writes:

The notion that marriage is a private relationship and thereby not able to be spoken about publicly or openly, except in a very general sense, does not help couples to learn from and be supported by other couples. This phenomenon also leads couples experiencing difficulties in their relationships to delay seeking help.

141 Community Link Australia (1997) *Program Development Final Report* 68.

142 Centacare Australia and Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, *Submissions*, p. S847.

143 *Transcript*, p. 200.

144 *ibid.*

145 See the discussion about the role of prevention *supra*.

146 'David Mace' [obituary] (1991) *Threshold* 32: 9.

The second myth is the idea of naturism, that is, being married is a natural state, and therefore we know automatically and innately how to 'do it'. No education or enhancement is required if it comes naturally.¹⁴⁷

The recent research about community attitudes to marriage and relationship education noted 'the confusion that exists between the concepts of "counselling" and "education" (and the strong problem orientation of counselling)¹⁴⁸ and the care necessary not to 'inadvertently strengthen peoples' belief that relationship education is only for couples who currently experience problems.'¹⁴⁹

For these reasons, the distinction between education and counselling or therapy, noted earlier in the reference to the comments of Dr Bernard Guerney, is important, both in policy and practice. The Committee is of the opinion that a clear distinction between preventive educational programs, and therapeutic and counselling programs should be maintained in the provision of funding to agencies by the Commonwealth Government.

Recommendation 6

The Committee reiterates its recommendation that funding pursuant to the Family Relationships Services Program clearly delineate between programs of prevention (such as marriage and relationship education and family skills training) and programs of therapy, counselling and mediation.

Strategies for increasing participation in marriage education

A number of strategies have been suggested for increasing participation in marriage and relationship education programs. These include wider promotion of programs, compulsory programs, and a new range of financial incentives.

1. Mass paid advertising

The suggestion that marriage and relationship education would benefit from mass advertising was suggested in a number of submissions. For example, the Family Relationships Institute submitted that the Committee should recommend 'a publicity campaign to change community attitudes about marriage education.'¹⁵⁰

147 M Andrews (1996) 'Developing a national strategy of marriage and family education' in B Muehlenberg et al (eds) *The family: there is no other way* Melbourne: Australian Family Association 62-84.

148 Donovan Research supra 7.

149 *ibid.* 27.

150 Family Relationships Institute, *Submissions*, p. S154.

Family Services Australia submitted:

Promotion of the value of accessing relationship and family services early, the type of services that are available, and where they are located, should form the basis of a wide ranging community education campaign that is closely linked to community programs, education programs in secondary schools, health programs and relationship and pre-marriage education programs.¹⁵¹

There have been a number of recent educational campaigns about marriage and relationship education. In 1993, the Australian Association for Marriage Education (now the Marriage Educator's Association of Australia) with Commonwealth Government assistance, launched a pilot media campaign entitled *How long before your marriage breaks down?*¹⁵² The campaign featured television, radio and print media materials around a central theme of using pre-marriage education to prevent marriage breakdown. The pilot campaign involved both pre and post campaign surveys of knowledge about marriage preparation. The surveys indicated an increased awareness of pre-marriage education as a result of the short campaign. Despite promising results, the campaign was not extended beyond the pilot stage.

In 1994, the Attorney-General's Department produced a relationships kit entitled *Is love enough?*¹⁵³ The kit consisted of a 12 minute video and a package of brochures and materials detailing the availability and usefulness of the range of family service programs. In addition, the kit contains brochures about some family service providers in the Melbourne region, where the campaign was trialed. The pilot campaign followed the release of the study *Pathways to marriage* which found that not one couple surveyed had attended a marriage education program on the recommendation of a civil celebrant. Despite a positive evaluation of the pilot, it was not continued by the Attorney-General's Department.

In 1995, Relationships Australia (WA) initiated a *Build better relationships* project which included a media campaign, featuring billboards and radio and press advertisements.¹⁵⁴ Evaluation of the initial media campaign revealed that 90 per cent of respondents talk to their partner to sort out problems (up from 59 per cent); 35 per cent saw approaching a counsellor as an option (up from 18 per cent); and 37 per cent had seen or heard advertising about how to improve their relationships.¹⁵⁵ A final evaluation of the three-year project found that 'there was a significant increase in the number of respondents who would talk to their partner if they had problems in the future (up 25 per cent to 84 per cent). It also showed a significant increase in the

151 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S692.

152 'Media campaign launch in Bendigo' (1993) *Threshold* 41: 4-7.

153 'Is love enough?' (1994) *Threshold* 46: 3.

154 'Make love, not war' (1996) *Threshold* 50: 13.

155 *ibid.*

number of people who would consider seeing a counsellor if they had relationship problems (up 12 per cent to 40 per cent).¹⁵⁶

A number of submissions suggested that the success of media campaigns against smoking provided a model for campaigns to inform people about the benefits of marriage and relationship education. In a report to the Attorney-General's Department, Donovan Research, the agency involved in the WA *Build better relationships* project, recommended an intrusive television and radio paid advertising campaign, followed by print advertisements, to place marriage and relationship education on the social agenda.¹⁵⁷ Other means of disseminating information was suggested to support the campaign. The researchers considered the approach to require a long-term strategy.¹⁵⁸

Similar suggestions have been made by others. The report *Healthy families, healthy nation*, suggested 'a community education program to better inform the community about issues that affect the psychosocial well-being of the family.'¹⁵⁹

The Committee believes that these suggestions must be treated with caution. First, the commonly drawn analogy with anti-smoking campaigns is simplistic. In addition to media campaigns against smoking, other measures, including the restricting of tobacco advertising, the insistence of health warnings on cigarette packages, and the introduction of laws against selling tobacco products to minors were implemented. Despite these measures, smoking is widespread, and campaigns against a recognised health risk continue.

Similarly, media campaigns against dangerous driving have been accompanied by major legislative changes, including extensive testing of drivers and severe penalties for those driving under the influence of alcohol.

Secondly, the Committee notes that the surveys for agencies in Perth do not reflect a major increase in participation in marriage and relationship education courses during 1995–97, part of the period of the *Build better relationships* project.¹⁶⁰ According to the data supplied to the Committee by the Perth marriage and relationship agencies, the number of participants in 1996–97 was less than those attending comparable programs in 1995–96. While it is noted that the number of callers to Relationships Australia increased during the campaigns, the increase does not, in itself, necessarily justify a paid mass-media campaign, especially when such campaigns are very

156 'Building better relationships' (1998) *Threshold* 58: 4.

157 Donovan Research (1998) *Marriage and relationship education market research community awareness strategy* Canberra: Attorney-General's Department 13.

158 *ibid.* 12.

159 MR Sanders (1995) *Healthy families, healthy nation* Canberra: Australian Academic Press 5.

160 See Appendices D to N.

expensive. According to the Final Report of the project, the media budget was \$50,000 per year, and some \$317,000 was gained in unpaid media coverage.¹⁶¹

Given the limited funding of the family relationships programs, especially marriage and relationship education, the Committee does not believe large expenditure on paid media advertising is justified.

However the Committee does recognise the value of successful, targeted campaigns. For example, the Australian Association of Marriage Education (AAME) and the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME), working cooperatively, produced a number of popular brochures including *Marriage education – All you need to know about it, even if you think you don't need to know about it at all*; and *Your wedding checklist*. The former brochure was subsequently used by marriage education agencies in Canada. A national marriage education week was used to raise awareness about marriage education, as did key-note speakers at national conferences. The Committee regrets that some of these activities were discontinued following the withdrawal of funding for AAME and CSME by the Attorney-General's Department.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the proposed Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council, in conjunction with other bodies in the field, including MEAA, and CSME, should continue to develop materials for the promotion of preventive programs to targeted groups, such as those entering relationships, and those having a first child.

Secondly, as outlined elsewhere, the Committee recommends that the Council examine the means of promoting relationships education in schools.

2. Mandatory pre-marriage education

The suggestion has been made from time to time that participation in a marriage education program should be mandatory for all couples wishing to marry in Australia.

Mandatory pre-marriage education has been introduced in a number of places. The most widespread example is for couples wishing to marry in the Catholic Church in the US where marriage education has been mandatory within most dioceses since the early 1980s.¹⁶² Over 90 per cent of the US diocese have formal policies that set

161 L Henry and C Smith (1998) *Build Better Relationships, Final Report 1994-97* Perth: Relationships Australia (WA).

162 B Markey (1995) 'The experience of mandatory marriage preparation in the Catholic church' *Threshold* 46: 20–21.

standards for marriage education which include a mandatory minimum time of preparation, the average being six months.¹⁶³ According to Dr Barbara Markey, co-author of the FOCCUS pre-marriage inventory and the Director of Marriage Education in Omaha, Nebraska:

The transition from 'recommended' to 'mandatory', from 'a good idea' to 'that which is necessary' went far better when it was preceded by education for professionals involved (clergy, counsellors, parish staff) and the public at large. We needed to educate people both on the needs and challenges facing couples today and the responsibility that the Church has to prepare couples well for marriage. It was important that we surprise no one on the reasons for requiring marriage preparation or the fact that it would be happening.

Required marriage education is today a 'given' in the United States Catholic Church and it was accomplished over a several year span with little controversy or surprise. Many other denominations use the Catholic approach as a model.¹⁶⁴

In his widely read *Marriage Savers*, the syndicated columnist Michael McManus, a Protestant, suggests that Protestant churches should follow the lead of the catholic church by introducing a common marriage policy.¹⁶⁵ The core elements of the marriage policy common to most US dioceses are: a minimum preparation period, on average six months, and none fewer than four months; the use of a pre-marriage inventory such as FOCCUS or PREPARE; the use of trained lay couples; participation in a pre-marriage education course; and religious ceremonies for the betrothed.¹⁶⁶

McManus comments:

These diocese have what is often called a 'Common Marriage Policy.' In the past, couples knew who was the 'Marrying Sam' – the priest who had lax marriage standards. Now, no matter which local priest a couple approaches, these challenging demands will be made in common.¹⁶⁷

Similar policies exist in Catholic dioceses in other parts of the world.¹⁶⁸

163 *ibid.* See also, National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1988) *Faithful to each other forever* Washington DC: NCCB.

164 B Markey *supra* 20.

165 MJ McManus (1993) *Marriage savers* Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan 131. See also, DS Browning et al (1997) *From culture wars to common ground* St Louis KY: Westminster John Knox Press 309.

166 M McManus *supra* 131–132.

167 *ibid.*

168 For example, in dioceses in Eire, and in Hamilton, New Zealand.

In Australia, the CSME published a discussion paper on mandatory marriage education in 1994.¹⁶⁹ The discussion paper recommended that 'CSME urge the Catholic bishops of Australia to introduce over a three year period a requirement that couples wishing to marry in the church participate in approved pre-marriage education.'

The paper generated ongoing discussion about the proposal. A number of reservations were advanced about the idea. First, there was the suggestion that 'people, who are free to marry, have a natural right to marry.'¹⁷⁰ Secondly, fears were expressed that the presence of hostile couples in programs would make the work of marriage educators more difficult.¹⁷¹ Thirdly, concerns were expressed about the quality of programs if attendance was made compulsory.¹⁷²

Other marriage educators expressed contrary views. Kevin Bailey, a Melbourne marriage educator, wrote:

Few of us are untouched in our own families by the human suffering of a divorce today. It is estimated that more than a third of marriages will fail, effecting Christians and non-Christians alike. We can hardly complain about the high level of divorce if we are not prepared to take positive steps to avoid it in the first place.¹⁷³

Peter White, a Queensland marriage educator, suggested, given the financial savings to government in preventing marriage breakdown, and the research supporting the value of marriage education, that mandatory pre-marriage education be introduced gradually over a period of time.¹⁷⁴

John Collins, a Sydney educator, argued from a social justice stance:

At first glance, the idea of compulsory pre-marriage education may seem an attack on civil liberties. The fact remains however, that in a modern social democracy like Australia there is a commitment to the promotion of human dignity through the provision of adequate financial support to those in need. The individual's right to financial support needs to be balanced with governmental responsibility to the whole of society. In this case, the responsibility is to try to reduce the number of people who are in need of financial assistance and the consequent demand on the public purse. The exercise of this responsibility requires targeted community education and

169 CSME (1995) 'On marriage preparation' *Threshold* 46: 14-17.

170 R Reid (1995) 'Mandatory program doubts' *Threshold* 46: 19.

171 D Lacey (1995) 'Concern about proposal' *Threshold* 46: 18.

172 R Reid *supra*; and Denise Lacey *supra*.

173 K Bailey (1995) 'A progressive step forward' *Threshold* 46: 18.

174 P White (1995) 'Introduce gradually' *Threshold* 46: 19.

marketing of pre-marriage education and legislation making government funded pre-marriage education compulsory.¹⁷⁵

Collins argued that the largest sector of the community were those whose morality was largely based on respect for law and order, and who would not be convinced to attend a pre-marriage education program no matter how good the marketing or community education, but would do so out of respect for the law.¹⁷⁶

If we, who are involved in preparing people for marriage, are seriously interested in serving those most in need and reducing the enormous emotional and financial burden borne by the whole community as a result of divorce, it would seem that one necessary step is to promote government funded compulsory pre-marriage education.

Dr Markey noted in her commentary on the United States that ‘couples are seldom hostile, but they are reluctant. Most couples would not seek out marriage education if it were entirely optional, even though they rate it as valuable when they have finished.’¹⁷⁷ She stressed that it was important to have ‘good, easily available and diverse education programs in place . . . ’.

In a recent commentary on proposed mandatory pre-marriage education in the United States generally, Drs Scott Stanley and Howard Markman from the University of Denver Center for Marital and Family Studies, voiced three concerns. First, many segments of society are averse to increasing governmental intervention in family life. Second, mandating premarital education would be a bureaucratic nightmare. Third, ‘we are concerned that there are virtually no data on the effectiveness of mandated programs while there is steadily growing evidence on the effectiveness when couples volunteer for such programs. We do hope, over time, to have better data on the effects of mandating premarital and marital training within both religious and military institutions’.¹⁷⁸

The Committee notes that the *Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act* passed this year by the Florida legislature includes a provision for a reduction in the cost of a marriage license for couples who have participated in a marriage education program. The bill had originally proposed compulsory marriage education.¹⁷⁹

175 J Collins (1995) ‘Compulsory marriage education: An issue of social justice’ *Threshold* 47: 13 & 15.

176 id. 17.

177 B Markey *supra* 20.

178 SM Stanley & HJ Markman (1997) *Can government rescue marriages* Denver: Center for Marital and Family Studies.

179 MJ McManus (1998) ‘Florida passes nation’s most sweeping reform of marriage law’ *Ethics and Religion* syndicated column 16 May.

Drs Stanley and Markman encouraged religious denominations to promote and even mandate marriage education as the idea 'is consistent with a degree of accountability within the community of faith.'¹⁸⁰ Instead of government-mandated education, they urged politicians, health professionals, marriage educators and clergy focus on two key goals: to extol strong and happy marriages as a high value and a high priority; and to encourage couples to take advantage of effective tools to make their marriages not just more stable, but truly better:

We are talking about values here. Values that say marriage is important. Values that say working to resolve differences is good. Values that say preparing for marriage is wise. Values that lead to increased dedication to the task of building strong and happy marriages. These things can be done if we have the collective will.

The Committee supports this sentiment.

Although the proposal for mandatory marriage education has not been adopted to date by the Australian Catholic Bishops, the survey of marriage education reveals that approximately 60-65 per cent of couples marrying in Catholic churches undertake a pre-marriage inventory or a group program. Apart from Anglicans, participation by adherents of other denominations and religious groups is considerably lower. For those marrying in a civil ceremony, participation is almost nil.

The Committee notes evidence from some existing providers of marriage education about the difficulty they have encountered in seeking government funding.¹⁸¹

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that existing agencies and organisations that have an established record of providing marriage and relationship education be approved as funded agencies.

Established agencies with a record of service delivery which meets accountability requirements, such as an incorporated entity with auditing provisions, should be approved for funding.

The Committee concludes that a priority for the proposed new Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council should be the development of strategies for increasing participation in marriage and relationship and parenting education programs.

180 id.

181 See for example, *Growing Together in Marriage*, *Submissions*, pp. S391-S392; Catholic Engaged Encounter, *Submissions*, pp. S118-S120; Jewish Community Services, *Submissions*, pp. S461-S477; St. John's Toorak, letter to Chairman.

The Committee also encourages all appropriate groups in the community, including religious denominations and civil celebrants organisations to adopt policies of encouraging couples contemplating marriage to participate in preparation programs.

3. Notification period for marriage

One matter raised with the Committee was the notification periods for marriage. Under current law, a couple are required to give notification of their intention to marry between one and six months prior to their wedding. It is common for wedding bookings, from the celebrant to the reception centre, to be made 12 – 18 months prior to the wedding. A longer notification period would seem to impose little burden. Ms Michele Simons suggested to the committee that ‘in the case of civil celebrants, an extension might be good because my experience is that couples will often only appear at the civil celebrant’s door with the minimum amount of time to organise it. When they are getting married in churches – because often churches are heavily booked – they can appear a year before, then quickly disappear into the woodwork and materialise again a month before the wedding.’¹⁸²

Dr Don Edgar, former director of the AIFS, has written ‘a consensus now seems to be emerging for a longer waiting period between marriage registration and the ceremony.’¹⁸³ The Committee concurs. It believes that a longer notification period in conjunction with a new funding system will have the effect of attracting more participants to pre-marriage education programs.

While the Committee is sympathetic to extending the minimum notification to a longer period than one month, it believes that a longer maximum period, combined with the other measures in this report, should be tried first. The advantage of a longer maximum notification period is that it allows for the earlier referral of couples intending to marry to marriage education programs. This change, in conjunction with other recommendations, is aimed at encouraging more people to participate in marriage education, especially those being married by civil celebrants.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the maximum period for notification of an intention to marry be extended by law to eighteen months.

The Committee encourages all celebrants, both religious and civil, individually and in their associations, to adopt policies of referring couples contemplating marriage to appropriate marriage education programs as long before the wedding as possible.

182 Ms Michele Simons, *Transcript*, p. 515.

183 D Edgar (1994) ‘Let’s marry slowly’ *Herald Sun* Melbourne: 6 June.

4. Financial incentives

A number of submissions to the inquiry stressed the importance of financial incentives directed at couples to encourage attendance at marriage and relationship education programs. Some noted the ability of churches to 'require' couples to attend education programs and the inability of civil celebrants to do likewise.¹⁸⁴

Financial incentives are provided indirectly by the provision of grants to approved marriage and relationship education agencies.¹⁸⁵ The agencies, in turn, use these and other funds to attract people to their programs. The participants, however, are unlikely to be aware of any financial incentive provided by either the agency or the government. Consequently, the provision of grants, although important to the agencies, is likely to have little influence on the decision of people to attend a program.

A number of submissions to the inquiry recommended the provision of direct financial incentives to potential participants.¹⁸⁶ A number of these suggested a direct payment to participants, which would be redeemable on an approved marriage and relationship education program. Mr Don Burnard, Executive Director of the Family Relationships Institute recommended:

A cash voucher be presented to each couple planning to marry with a maximum value of say \$150. This voucher can only be redeemed with an approved agency who is running workshops led by competent educators. The voucher amount would be redeemed by couples who undertake either a two full day workshop or four sessions each of two and a half hours over a four week period. The choice of workshop must be determined by the couple alone who clearly understand that they have a choice of secular or church program. The vouchers could be distributed by civil and religious celebrants who make it clear that the Government expects the voucher to be used by the couple.¹⁸⁷

Mr Bruce Findlay, a former member of the AAME national executive asked:

How about making a voucher available to late adolescents, which is redeemable by any recognised agency when the individual attends one of their courses. That would have the added advantage of indicating that the government approves and recommends such courses, and may help change community attitudes about the desirability of those courses.¹⁸⁸

184 Family Relationship Institute, *Submissions*, p. S852.

185 Attorney-General's Department, *Submissions*, p. S962. See also the discussion of funding above in this chapter.

186 See for example, Family Relationships Institute, *Submissions*, p. S862; Bruce Findlay, *Submissions*, p. S115; Catholic Society for Marriage Education, *Submissions*, p. S932.

187 Family Relationships Institute, *Submissions*, pp. S862–S863 and S1184.

188 Mr Bruce Findlay, *Submissions*, p. S115.

Financial incentives can be provided in a number of ways, including taxation deductions, taxation rebates, subsidies to agencies providing courses, or subsidies to individuals undertaking programs. For reasons outlined earlier in this chapter, the current system of providing grants to agencies has resulted in an inequitable system.¹⁸⁹

The Committee is of the opinion that the funding of all family relationship services, including marriage and relationship education, should reflect a number of principles: First, the funding should be equitable, as between agencies and as between participants in programs. Secondly, the funding scheme should be transparent in operation. Thirdly, the funding should be directly referable to services delivered. Fourthly, the funding should provide direct incentives to individuals and couples to participate in programs.

The direct payment system suggested in a number of submissions meets the criteria posited by the Committee. However, some submissions were concerned that a funding arrangement based entirely on service delivery would create some problems, especially in transition. Dr Browne commented:

It takes a long time to redress those sorts of imbalances. You have two ways you can do it. You can say, 'We will start again. We will have a greenfield site. We will identify the areas. Then we will call for tenders. We will contract services accordingly' This is an approach that would probably yield you the most equitable result, but which would be very disruptive for services – there would be upsides and downsides in that sort of approach – or else you can use new money that comes into the program to try to redress some of the imbalances. I guess it is the latter approach that we have been taking. I should add that when the government provided more money for marriage education in 1996, we did use some of that money to bring some of the least funded services up to a level of \$15,000 a year, I think it was, to give them some sort of minimum viability. We have done a little bit of levelling up if you like, but there are still large discrepancies.¹⁹⁰

There are a number of problems with this approach. First, because the focus is on agencies, rather than participants, inequities are unlikely to be overcome. Even if the inequities could be overcome, it would take many years. Indeed, it is arguable that some recent funding decisions have actually widened the inequities. More importantly, current funding does not take account of service delivery. To object that there would be 'upsides and downsides' involved in any change is to accept the current upsides and downsides. The Committee does not agree that agencies which are not delivering services according to their level of current funding should continue to receive such levels of funding because of historical arrangements. Nor should

189 Dr Margaret Browne, *Transcript*, p. 1006.

190 Dr Margaret Browne, *Transcript*, p. 1006.

agencies which are delivering programs to many participants continue to be underfunded, and, in some cases, unfunded. Justice and public accountability require the funding to be changed.

The Catholic Society for Marriage Education submitted that:

The major benefits of a voucher system are that: as a method of advertising course availability it does not cost the government if the voucher is not utilised; it directs the expenditure of some funding to assisting couples who are doing courses (a sort of government wedding present underlining the government's concerns for their happiness); research indicates that those who attend pre-marriage programs are more likely to seek counselling, and to do so sooner rather than later, thereby increasing the effectiveness of other forms of family mediation and counselling; and the voucher could be linked to a pre-marital inventory such as FOCCUS or PREPARE. The feedback provided by the facilitator could then direct the couple towards a course specifically suited to their individual needs.¹⁹¹

The CSME also recognised some possible disadvantages, including the spawning of a second rate marriage preparation industry, the use of shorter courses, and difficulties of program planning and administration.¹⁹² These concerns led the CSME to suggest that vouchers should be used only as an adjunct to current funding. Nonetheless, the CSME submitted that it was qualified to determine the suitability of courses proposed as appropriate for voucher redemption.¹⁹³

While the Committee believes that ideally funding should be linked to ascertainable service-delivery, it does recognise that agencies fear difficulties in knowing the level of clientele to expect, and, accordingly, the size of their administration. The Committee believes this concern is overstated. First, the survey of funded agencies revealed similar levels of program administration. The majority of programs were administered with no more than the equivalent of one full-time staff member, and many with less. Few agencies had a higher staffing level for their marriage and relationship education program. Generally these agencies also had larger numbers of participants in their programs. Under a direct service-delivery scheme, agencies would be able to plan, based on the historic levels of participation.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the funding of marriage and relationship education be based primarily on service delivery.

A case for a base level of funding can be argued out in some circumstances, such as rural agencies, new agencies, or agencies providing a new service. The Committee

191 CSME, *Submissions*, pp. S936–S937.

192 CSME, *Submissions*, p. S937.

193 *ibid.*

also recognises that a direct service-delivery funding scheme would have an adverse impact on a few agencies for which funding far outweighs reported service delivery. While the Committee is of the opinion that the latter situation should not be allowed to continue, it does accept that the combination of a small base level of funding combined with a larger service-delivery component would address the concerns voiced to it by agencies.

The Committee concludes that while funding based entirely on service delivery is possible, there are reasons, in a developing field, to provide a base allocation to approved agencies to ensure a continuing service to the community.

The Committee has examined a number of funding options for a combination of a base grant and a service delivery component. In doing so, it notes a number of relevant factors.

5. Duration of programs

In their evaluation of the marriage and relationship education program, Keys Young noted that programs which are most likely to obtain positive results are 'longer rather than shorter', amongst other things.¹⁹⁴

Other evidence supports the contention that in order for programs to be effective, they need to consist of a reasonable period of time. Dr David Olson, author of the PREPARE pre-marriage inventory, and professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, has stressed that more time was required for programs that sought to produce attitudinal change and behavioural change, than those aimed merely at raising awareness.¹⁹⁵ He said that six weeks is the shortest time necessary for skill building. Two or three hours per week class contact with some homework allows for a learning of skills that is more than superficial. Dr Olson also stressed the usefulness of pre-marital inventories such as PREPARE and FOCCUS.

Ms Michele Simons, the author of the two major studies of pre-marriage education in Australia told the committee that a minimum time of possibly 10–12 hours is required for adequate marriage preparation group programs. Other evidence suggested that the ideal time for the completion of a pre-marriage inventory, including follow-up sessions with the facilitator is approximately six hours.

The results of the survey of family relationship agencies indicates that almost all agencies offer group programs of two days in duration, or the equivalent hours over a series of evenings. The length of programs has generally increased over the past decade as agencies have recognised the need for more participant time. Some agencies have also offered much shorter courses of one to two hours in duration, usually around a specific topic, such as better communication. One agency has described this approach as 'a "starting point" or introduction for many people to the "helping" profession and its range of services'.¹⁹⁶ The educators stressed that a benefit of the short course was a readiness by participants to use other services, should the need arise. However, there is no evidence of a substantial return rate. Indeed, the Family Relationships Institute, a leading secular agency, noted in its submission that the return rate for post-wedding programs was only three per cent.¹⁹⁷

The large variations in the duration of courses raises important questions of both effectiveness and equity. Should a course for an hour receive the same level of Commonwealth subsidy as one which extends for 15 hours? Given the evidence that longer rather than shorter courses are more effective, particularly for imparting skills, such as better communication and conflict resolution techniques, the Committee

194 Keys Young (1997) *supra* 144.

195 'David Olson in Australia' (1988) *Threshold* 19: 8.

196 P Hall & D Ervine (1997) 'Groups in the 90s: Reaching remote populations within busy Adelaide' *Threshold* 57: 16–19.

197 Family Relationships Institute, *Submissions*, p. S858.

believes that there should be a minimum length of program or course in order for it to attract Commonwealth funding.

Recommendation 11

After considering the research evidence, and analysing the surveys, the Committee recommends that in order to receive Commonwealth funding, a course or program must be a minimum of six hours duration.

The Committee notes that this recommendation would allow funding for the following types of marriage and relationships education programs:

- An inventory such as PREPARE or FOCCUS where the during of the program, including both the introduction to the inventory, completion of the inventory by the couple, scoring or arranging for computer scoring, analysis of the matched results, and subsequent follow-up sessions with the couple would normally involve about six hours.
- A group program conducted over at least one day, usually two, or a series of evenings.
- A program consisting of a series of three evening seminars, amounting to at least six hours in duration.

The Committee stresses that the six hours is a minimum duration for which Commonwealth funding is available. It does not seek to proscribe programs to only six hours, and believes that the current trend towards longer programs will continue. However, it believes that funding should not be provided for programs of such short duration, such as one to two hours, that are unlikely to have a substantial educative impact.

Inventory programs

Both the Committee's survey of marriage and relationship education and submissions to it revealed the considerable growth in the use of inventories such as FOCCUS and PREPARE in the past decade. This growth in marriage education has not been reflected in funding arrangements. Nor was it remarked upon in any substantial manner in the Keys Young evaluation. In the Committee's opinion, this is a major oversight.

The Committee is of the opinion that there should be no funding discrimination against inventory programs such as FOCCUS and PREPARE. However, the Committee does recognise that the majority of marriage educators using the inventories are not directly employed by or affiliated with a funded agency.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that both PREPARE-ENRICH Australia and FOCCUS Australia be funded as marriage and relationship agencies, and provided with a base grant.

Secondly, PREPARE-ENRICH Australia and FOCCUS Australia should be paid the service delivery component where inventories are facilitated by educators not otherwise affiliated with funded agencies. It would be the responsibility of the two national bodies to make any subsequent payment to individual educators, after deducting any scoring or other appropriate fees. This approach has a number of advantages. First, it brings the funding system up to date by recognising the considerable growth on the use of pre-marriage and post-wedding inventories. Secondly, it provides a simple system of administration that does not require the government to deal directly with hundreds of educators using the inventory programs. Thirdly, it imposes a system of accountability through PREPARE-ENRICH Australia and FOCCUS Australia. Fourthly, it restricts payment to educators who have up to date accreditation with a funded agency.

The Committee has discussed these proposals with representatives of both PREPARE-ENRICH Australia and FOCCUS Australia. It understands that the national registration of accredited facilitators in either in place or being established currently by the two bodies.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that both national bodies establish by the end of June 1999, when it is proposed that the new arrangements begin, continuing education requirements and minimum standards for accredited facilitators of the inventories.

The costs of these proposals are discussed below.

The value of base grants and service delivery components

The Committee notes, that according to its analysis of the level of Commonwealth funding and the number of participants in 1996–97, the average Commonwealth grant per participant was approximately \$98.00. The range was from \$7.80 to \$1,048.33. It also notes that total program expenditure has increased in 1997–98, but anecdotal evidence suggests no substantial increase in numbers of participants at group programs. It is also noted that a further 26,000 people participated in inventory programs. For the most part, these programs did not attract Commonwealth grants.

In determining an appropriate level of base grant, the Committee examined the levels of administration reported by the agencies. It also considered that the major emphasis should remain on the service delivery component. A range of possible funding combinations were considered.

Recommendation 14

After examining the evidence and giving consideration to the possible combinations of funding, the Committee recommends that approved agencies and organisations be provided with an annual base grant of \$30,000 to cover basic administration costs.

The Committee recommends that further grants to agencies and organisations be made for the delivery of services on a per participant basis.

In order to qualify for grants, the Committee recommends that agencies and organisations be required to meet the following criteria:

- **They offer education services in two of the three recognised education frameworks, namely, (1) an inventory, (2) an information-awareness program, and (3) a skills training program; and**
- **That the program be for a minimum of 6 hours duration.**

The Committee notes that in the case of FOCCUS Australia and PREPARE/ENRICH Australia, they only need to offer programs in one educational framework, namely, an inventory, because of their peculiar circumstances.

As expressed above, the Committee is of the opinion that the funding system should provide an incentive to individual couples to participate in marriage and relationship education programs. The Committee is of the opinion that the current system of funding, apart from being inequitable, fails to provide an incentive for participation in programs and courses. The system proposed by the Committee will provide such incentives, especially for those couples marrying civilly, of whom very few currently attend programs.

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the service delivery component of the funding be provided by way of a complimentary voucher, made available through marriage celebrants, redeemable by booking for and attending a marriage and relationship education program conducted by an approved agency or organisation.

The Committee recommends that the complimentary vouchers be provided to all marriage celebrants.

The Committee also recommends that the complimentary vouchers be available from family relationships service agencies to ensure that people not currently planning to marry, such as those in de facto relationships, have access to the marriage and relationship education services.

The Committee recommends that marriage celebrants be required to give a complimentary voucher to each couple who approaches him or her to officiate at their wedding.

The Committee notes that a direct service delivery method of funding could be implemented without the use of a complimentary voucher. Agencies could provide details of the number of participants and be paid by the Department on that basis. However, the Committee is mindful of the considerable difficulty to date in attracting many couples, especially those being married by a civil celebrant, to participate in a marriage and relationship education program. The Committee believes that the use of the complimentary voucher will serve as a real encouragement for these couples to participate in marriage and relationship education.

The Committee notes that the payment of the \$30,000 base grants to 50 agencies would cost \$1.5 million per year. This includes some new agencies. The Committee notes that the average fee paid per participant was approximately \$98 in 1996–97. (According to data provided by the Attorney-General's Department, the average fee was about \$90).

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the service delivery component of the fee be set at \$60 per participant.

When added to the base grant of \$30,000, the total amount represents a real increase in funding for most agencies. Based on 1996–97 data, the service delivery component would amount to \$3.089 million. The total cost would be approximately \$4.589 million.

The Committee notes that these figures are calculated on current levels of participation. It expresses the wish that as a result of these measures, the levels of participation will increase. Even if all couples marrying undertook a marriage and relationship program, the total cost to the Commonwealth by way of grants would be approximately \$14 million. If all couples marrying for a first time participated, the cost would be less than \$10 million. It cannot be claimed that the expenditure is open-ended. Given the cost of marriage and relationship breakdown exceeds \$3 billion a year, the proposed expenditure is a very modest sum. The Committee believes that such a level of expenditure, should it be required in the future is highly desirable. The Committee also notes the advice of AAME and CSME in 1993 that based on the conservative estimate of 5 per cent of couples who attend a marriage education program deciding to postpone or cancel their wedding, the savings to the Commonwealth if all couples attended such programs would far outweigh the modest investment of \$10 million. It also notes the advice from the AIFS in 1989, that for every \$1 spent on marriage counselling, the Commonwealth would save \$7.¹⁹⁸

198 I Wolcott & H Glezer (1989) *Marriage counselling in Australia* Melbourne: AIFS.

The Committee notes that the Attorney-General's Department is currently developing FAMnet as a computerised, internet linked, recording system for the family services program. The Committee believes that this system will enable the easy recording of the certificates provided by couples to agencies, and the smooth redemption of the service delivery funds from the Commonwealth to the individual agencies. The Committee believes that this could be done on a monthly or quarterly basis by the Department. Agencies would be required to keep the certificates, duly signed by the couple and an agency official for a specified period of years to enable any audit to occur. Otherwise, the Committee envisages that there should be no need for any other paperwork required of the agencies in order to meet appropriate requirements for accountability and transparency.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the new funding system be implemented from the beginning of the 1999–2000 financial year.

The Committee recommends that funding for marriage and relationship education agencies be increased by \$1.6 million for the 1999–2000 financial year.

The Committee recommends that new contracts with agencies not be entered into until the new system of funding is implemented. In order to enable this to occur, existing contracts should be extended by a period of up to 12 months.

Training and standards

The previous examination of the development of marriage and relationship education in Australia provides an outline of the origins of programs over the past four decades. It was not until the field developed a significant adult education focus in the 1980s that the training of educators was examined. As the following discussion indicates, considerable advances have been made in the past decade, both in the training of educators and the attaining of standards.

A concerted interest in the appropriate standards for marriage educators can be traced to a national conference conducted by the then Australian Association for Marriage Education in 1988. The conference workshopped a number of topics before settling a 'Model for training and supervision of marriage educators in Australia'¹⁹⁹

Subsequently, the Attorney-General's Department funded AAME for the employment of a national trainer. The trainer conducted regular workshops and seminars throughout Australia during the years 1989–1993.

199 'A model for training and supervision of marriage educators in Australia' (1998) *Threshold* 20: 8–11.

The training ceased when the Department re-organised the funding of peak bodies in 1994 .

A complementary project involved the development of a curriculum by academics from the University of South Australia in conjunction with educators in the field.²⁰⁰ This project resulted in the development and registration of competency standards for marriage educators. The standards were registered in 1997.

Competency standards are precise statements about what a marriage and relationship educator is able to do in the actual workplace. They specify the activities that a person must be competent in and the criteria for judging competence. The competency standards consist of five components: units of competency, elements of competency, performance criteria, a range of variables, and evidence guides for assessment.²⁰¹

Current training

A number of recent surveys indicate the level of training of marriage educators. In their 1992 study, *Love Sex and Waterskiing*, Roger Harris et al found the educators 'were generally a well educated group, with over two-thirds holding tertiary diplomas (19%) bachelor's degrees (29%) or postgraduate qualifications(23%). Another 13% held other post-secondary qualifications from TAFE and business colleges.'²⁰² The researchers noted that while very few marriage educators have qualifications specifically in that field, that was 'to be expected with such little availability of relevant courses.'²⁰³ There was, however, 'a preponderance of disciplines that could be considered to have some direct relevance to pre-marriage education, such as teaching/education, psychology, social work, sociology and counselling.'²⁰⁴ The content and style of training for the role as a pre-marriage educator ranged from no formal training for those with relevant qualifications, such as teaching, through limited formal training, to more extensive formal training.²⁰⁵

The more recent Keys Young survey found that despite no tertiary level training specifically for marriage and relationship educators, 'educators were generally well qualified in terms of tertiary qualifications.' Out of a total of 686 educators surveyed,

200 R Harris & M Simons (1995) 'Developing national competency standards for marriage educators: A progress report' *Threshold* 48: 22–25.

201 M Simons (1995) *Draft national competency standards for marriage/relationship educators* Adelaide: University of South Australia.

202 R Harris et al (1992) *Love, Sex and Waterskiing* Adelaide: University of South Australia 59.

203 *ibid.* 61.

204 *id.*

205 *ibid.* 65–66.

501 had tertiary qualifications with education, social work/welfare or psychology qualifications being the most common.²⁰⁶

The survey also revealed that there was considerable 'in-house' training of people for the task of marriage educator, an informal system of apprenticeships and mentoring by more experienced educators.

The Committee's survey of agencies indicated a range of training for educators. The results indicated that the agencies have been developing training programs, following the impetus provided by having a national trainer and the work on competency standards. One agency indicated that it had developed a course accredited by VETAC, which it used in conjunction with mentoring. Another group of agencies conduct a joint training program as well as individual mentoring within respective agencies. Many conducted regular in-house seminars and workshops. Others referred educators to workshops and conferences conducted by organisations such as the Marriage Educators' Association of Australia, State conferences, and the annual national marriage education conference. FOCCUS and PREPARE facilitators are required to undertake training programs offered by the two organisations. Agencies have begun to use the national competencies as the basis for training programs.

Information provided to the Committee also suggested that agencies view on-going regular supervision of educators as a core component in their maintenance of standards.

The Committee concludes that while the system of training remains informal, nonetheless agencies and individual educators regard training and on-going skills development as central to their work.

Future training

The registration of the national competency standards for marriage and relationship education marks an important milestone for the field. The Committee believes that this development, undertaken by members of the field largely of their own initiative, indicates a way forward. Because the development of the competency standards was undertaken with the direct input of marriage and relationship educators, it is founded on their experience.

Some other suggestions have also been made. Keys Young, for example, referred to higher and lower order skills: 'while one sector of the field is focussing on establishing basic competencies which might reflect an emphasis on "adult learning" principles, another sector of the field might see higher order skills in group work, therapy and

206 Keys Young (1997) *supra* 76–77.

counselling skills somewhat more relevant areas of expertise.²⁰⁷ Unfortunately, like other aspects of the report, the authors fail to expand upon these comments.

Alternative proposals have also advanced in the development of the new FAMQIS system. The term 'FAMQIS' was coined by the Attorney-General's Department to describe a new Quality Strategy and Information System for services approved and funded by the Family Services Branch.²⁰⁸ A new information system, called 'FAMnet' is being piloted in a number of selected sites across the nation. The object of the system is to allow agencies to forward client data to the Department, via the internet, in a convenient and secure way, generate reports of their own activities and performance, according to performance indicators available on the FAMnet, and network with other branches and agencies.²⁰⁹

The FAMQIS project has included proposals about entry to the field. In line with the Regulations, established for mediators, two standards are proposed. The first is based on the qualifications and competencies of staff (standard 4), and the second is based on experience and competency (standard 5).

Proposed standard 4 provides:

Within three months of commencement in a position, family relationship practitioners (other than family and child mediators and people working in contact services) are required to have:

- An appropriate degree, diploma or other qualification, and
- Completed 5 days vocational training of direct relevance to their role, and
- Completed 10 hours of supervised practice, and
- A level of competence appropriate to the commencement of their role assessed by the organisation.

In accordance with the attributes set out below.

Attributes

Evidence of an appropriate degree, diploma or other qualification is

- A course of at least three years with an orientation to behavioural or social sciences; or
- A course of study of at least one year in an area of direct relevance to the specialised role to be undertaken.

Evidence of competencies formulated by organisations for use in recruitment to practitioner/educator roles.

207 *ibid.*

208 Family Services Branch (1997) *Introducing FAMQIS*
<www.softlaw.com.au/famqis/introduc.htm>

209 *ibid.*

Proposed standard 5 provides:

A family relationship practitioner is required to be experienced in service provision or to be currently providing direct service in a non-profit organisation which is either at least substantially a family relationship service of some kind or which is funded by the Commonwealth or a State/Territory Government; and

- To demonstrate a level of competence appropriate to the commencement of their role as assessed by the organisation; and
- To have enrolled in a relevant course of study within four months of commencement of duties.

Attributes

Evidence that an organisation has satisfied itself that an employee or contracted person is experienced, that is, that

- People in counselling and therapeutic roles have had 150 hours of direct client contact in the previous five years, including at least 50 hours in the previous two years;
- People in educational roles have had 50 hours of direct client contact in the previous five years, including at least 20 hours in the previous two years.

Evidence that an organisation has satisfied itself that a course enrolled is a degree, diploma or other qualification that is

- A course of at least three years at bachelor level with an orientation to behavioural or social sciences; or
- A course of study of at least one year in an area of direct relevance to the specialised role to be undertaken.

Evidence in terms of existing staff of history of employment in family relationships service or other funded not for profit organisation.

The Committee notes that these proposals would require a marriage and relationship educator to undertake an appropriate degree, diploma or other qualification of at least one year's duration, in addition to other practice. The consultants listed responses from various people consulted, but did not identify which were educators, counsellors, mediators or administrators. Nor did the comments relate the proposals to current training practices.

The Committee believes the proposals are further evidence of the confusion that arises when education services are treated the same as counselling and therapeutic services. It notes that well developed marital education programs, such as PREPARE and FOCCUS, about which considerable research has been undertaken, both in the development stage and in practice, do not require such entry standards. Nor do other well-developed educational programs require such entry standards. A consequence of these proposals would be, in the view of the Committee, to create two classes of marriage education in Australia: a few funded programs catering to a limited number

of individuals, and numerous unfunded programs continuing to cater to the greater number of people. The failure of both the Keys Young report and the Department to recognise the huge growth in the use of pre-marital inventories illustrates this problem.

The Committee also views the proposals as totally unrealistic. As noted elsewhere, there are no specialised academic marriage education degrees or courses in Australia. While standards can always be improved, the Committee does not believe that current standards are generally unsatisfactory. Thirdly, the Committee believes that the work in establishing the national competency standards should be built upon constructively. It is also disappointed that the two bodies representing the largest groups of marriage educators in Australia, namely CSME and MEAA, have not been consulted directly in this process. The Committee notes that the standards required for Family Relationships Service personnel will differ. The qualifications and standards required for a mediator who is required to have knowledge of complex issues of divorce law differs from that required of counsellors working in a therapeutic setting and again from educators working in an educational environment.

The Committee views these proposals, and the manner in which they have been advanced, as a further reason for restructuring both the family services program and the manner in which advice is provided to the department, so as to clearly delineate between educational programs, and counselling and therapeutic services.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends the following training for marriage and relationship educators in funded agencies:

- **All educators working for funded agencies should have reached the national competency standards by the end of the 1998-1999 financial year;**
- **As from 1 July 1999, all new educators working in funded agencies must attain the national competency standards within six months of commencing to work for the agency (unless they have previously attained the standards); and**
- **All educators should complete a minimum of 50 hours practice each year to maintain their accreditation. The 50 hours can include up to 15 hours of in-service training.**

The Committee recognises that for educators working in rural and regional areas, there may not be the same demand currently for programs, and hence not the same opportunities to facilitate programs.

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that for educators outside the metropolitan areas, the current requirement be 25 hours, including up to 10 hours in-service training. This provision should be reviewed after three years.

The Committee further recommends that a grant be provided to the Marriage Educators Association of Australia to conduct a series of training programs in 1998–99 to assist individuals and agencies to reach the national competency standards.

The Committee also recommends that MEAA develop an accreditation for marriage educators, based on the national competency standards. Such accreditation would satisfy an agency that an educator had attained the national standards.

While the Committee would wish to encourage higher levels of education among marriage and relationship educators, it does not believe that a tertiary qualification is a necessary prerequisite for practice.

Publications

***Threshold* magazine**

Threshold is a magazine about marriage education, published by CSME and available to all marriage educators in Australia. It also has subscribers in New Zealand and other overseas countries. According to the editorial policy, 'it is designed to provide information and resources to meet the needs of educators working in the field of marriage education, and to act as a forum for the discussion of current ideas.'²¹⁰ The magazine commenced as a newsletter in 1987. It was transformed into a magazine in 1988 and named *Threshold*. It is published quarterly and has a circulation of some 1,800 copies each edition. Although published by CSME, it is distributed to almost all marriage and relationship educators in Australia, particularly those affiliated with CSME, the Marriage Educators' Association of Australia, and FOCCUS Australia.

The magazine has been developed in recent years to include news items, articles about current practice, details of the latest research relating to marriage and relationship education, as well as news of conferences, workshops and new books and other resources. New computer facilities and publishing software have enabled an upgrade in quality, although a considerable amount of voluntary effort is contributed to each edition.

Recent issues of *Threshold* have contained articles by leading researchers in the field, including Professor Linda Waite from the University of Chicago, and past-president of the American Population Association; Professor Scott Stanley from the University of Denver and co-author of the PREP marriage preparation program, Dr Moira Eastman, author of *Family – The Vital Factor*; Ms Michele Simons, co-author of the leading Australian research into marriage education; Professor Herbert Anderson, author of *Becoming Married* and other texts; Professor Denis Ladbrook from Curtin

210 'Editorial policy' (1998) *Threshold* 58: 2.

University; and Dr Sotirios Sarantakos, a leading researcher on cohabitation. Issues have also included articles from leading marriage educators from both secular and church agencies about current practice.

Threshold has received a modest grant of \$10,000 from the Attorney-General's Department in recent years, as a contribution towards its publication. There is no other magazine/journal that serves the emerging field of marriage and relationship education in Australia in a similar manner.

The publication received considerable support in submissions to the inquiry. CSME submitted:

A federal commitment to . . . produce *Threshold* would ensure that all educators, many of whom work in isolation would stay abreast of developments in the field. Such a funding commitment would be a tangible sign of government appreciation and recognition to all educators working in a voluntary capacity, in geographic isolation and for unfunded agencies.²¹¹

The Marriage Educators Association of Australia also supported the continued funding of *Threshold*.²¹²

In their evaluation of the marriage and relationship education program, Keys Young suggested that 'incentives be offered for the development of a professional journal which fosters open and critical debate on key issues, and contributes to the professional development of the field by providing a vehicle for educators to share resources and service development expertise and present their work to peers and others for critical review'.²¹³

The suggestion is surprising for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the failure of Keys Young to even consult the editor about *Threshold*! As the Committee has already noted, the magazine has provided a forum for critical debate and reflection for many years, publishing some of the most respected researchers and academics in the field, together with articles about current developments, resources, programs and different approaches to marriage and relationship education. Nor did Keys Young make any study about other journals, including their costing and circulation.

There are other publications that relate to family and marriage issues. Perhaps the best known in Australia is *Family Matters*, the magazine of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Published three times a year, *Family Matters* is a multi-colour glossy

211 Catholic Society for Marriage Education, *Submissions*, p. S936.

212 Marriage Educators Association of Australia, *Submissions*, p. S287.

213 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of the Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program: Final Report* Sydney: 156.

magazine of about 72 pages. Until recently, only the work of AIFS researchers was published in the magazine. It has a circulation of about 4,000 copies each issue.

The *Australian Journal of Marriage and Family*, formerly the *Journal of Sex Marriage and Family* was published by the Family Life Movement for many years. It had a small circulation and was subsidised by Family Life. Eventually, Family Life decided that it could not continue to subsidise the journal. A *Journal of Family Issues* is now published by La Trobe University Press.

The Australian Association for Marriage Education (as it then was) designated *Threshold* as its official publication in the late 1980s. The subsequent Marriage Educators' Association publishes a small newsletter, but also encourages members to read *Threshold*. Family Services Australia produced two editions of a journal entitled *Scope*, but has discontinued publication, due to the costs involved. Neither Centacare nor Relationships Australia produce a magazine.

Some agencies publish newsletters for their educators and clients. The Family Relationships Institute Inc. commenced a quarterly journal *Relatewell* in 1997. The Marriage Education Programme Inc. publishes a series of newsletters entitled *Marriage Today* for newly married couples. The Engaged Encounter Movement publishes a quarterly newsletter, as do the Couples for Marriage Enrichment Australia. Some agencies have also developed their own websites to disseminate information about programs and services.

A survey of the publishing record of magazines and journals in the field of family and marriage reveals an uncertain existence. Even the circulation of the AIFS magazine *Family Matters* is modest. That CSME has been able to sustain the publication of *Threshold* for many years in a still developing field in which few people are full time, paid educators is commendable.

This year, CSME undertook a readership survey and conducted a professionally facilitated review of *Threshold*.²¹⁴ The survey and a subsequent workshop involving marriage educators from different agencies indicated overwhelming support for the publication of the magazine. The great majority of respondents to the survey found *Threshold* very useful for them in their work.²¹⁵

The magazine has served a very useful role in disseminating the latest research, publicising resources and educational opportunities for marriage educators, discussing different approaches to practice in the field, and stimulating debate about future directions. The number of references to articles published in *Threshold* in this report testify to its value in the field over the past decade. It has also been useful to government as a means of informing the field about policy directions and program funding from time to time. Submissions to the Committee also noted the importance

214 'Editorial' (1998) *Threshold* 58: 2.

215 The Chairman was invited to, and attended the facilitated workshop on the magazine.

of the magazine for educators in rural and regional areas of Australia. The magazine has been able to provide important information to a developing field, for the benefit of marriage and relationship education generally. Further, this has been achieved with a remarkably low budget of about \$20,000 per year.

Diane Sollee, director of the US Coalition for Marriage and Family Education, wrote recently that *Threshold* is the most valuable publication about marriage education available.²¹⁶

The Committee is of the opinion that without *Threshold*, the developments that have occurred in the field of marriage and relationship education in Australia over the past decade would not have been as widespread or as successful. The Committee understands that the Attorney-General's Department has been awaiting the report of this inquiry before continuing funding.

Recommendation 20

Given the importance attached to the continued publication of the magazine by marriage and relationship educators, the quality of the publication, and the developing nature of the field, the Committee recommends that the Commonwealth grant towards the publication of *Threshold* be continued by the Attorney-General's Department.

The Committee is of the opinion that there is no reason that funding should not be provided for the 1997–98 financial year and many good reasons for funding to continue in future years.

The role of civil marriage celebrants

The national survey of the provision of marriage education conducted by the Committee indicates that in the period 1996–97 approximately 40,000 individuals participated in pre-marriage education. This represents the equivalent of 20 per cent of all couples marrying in Australia. The survey also shows that most participants in pre-marriage education programs go on to be married in church-based ceremonies rather than civil ceremonies.²¹⁷ The implication of this research is that civil celebrants rarely refer couples to pre-marriage education.

Given that almost half of all marriage ceremonies in Australia are now conducted by civil marriage celebrants,²¹⁸ the Committee finds this low referral rate by civil celebrants of some concern. As celebrants are in a strong position to refer couples to pre-marriage programs, the Committee believes it is important to address the

216 Coalition for Marriage and Family Education **webmail**.

217 See Appendices D to N.

218 Australian Bureau of Statistics (1996) *Marriages and Divorces 22*.

question of how to encourage couples being married civilly to attend marriage and relationship education programs.

Background to the Civil Marriage Celebrant Program

The Civil Marriage Celebrant Program was established in 1973 by the then Attorney-General, the Hon. Senator Lionel Murphy, to provide a secular alternative and freedom of choice for marrying couples who did not wish to have a religious ceremony and yet did not want a registry wedding.²¹⁹ The Marriage Celebrants sub-program within the Attorney-General's Department ('the Department') is administered by the Family Relationships Services Branch (FRSB) and is concerned with authorisation, monitoring and support for authorised marriage celebrants appointed under the *Marriage Act 1961*.

At 30 May 1998 there were 1,645 civil marriage celebrants authorised under s 39 (2) of the Marriage Act. The distribution of civil celebrants across Australia is uneven, being mainly concentrated in metropolitan areas. This heavy concentration or over supply of celebrants occurred in 1995 when new arrangements for appointment brought an additional 800 celebrants into the field. This was a 100 per cent increase. The Department has since acknowledged this problem and under new arrangements, approved by the Attorney-General in June 1996, additional authorisations are made only on the basis of identified levels of community need.²²⁰

In April 1996, the Attorney-General initiated a review of the Civil Marriage Celebrant Program, the aim being to make the program more relevant to the needs and aspirations of couples marrying, and to ensure civil marriage celebrants are thoroughly professional, sensitive to the needs and wishes of their clients, and committed to marrying couples with dignity.²²¹

As part of this review, the Department undertook extensive consultations with the various stakeholders, and in November 1997 issued a discussion paper covering all aspects of the Civil Marriage Celebrant Program. The discussion paper covers such matters as ethics, a code of conduct for civil marriage celebrants, service standards, professional development, training, fees, advertising standards, and legal matters. Significantly, the paper also considers the role of celebrants in referring couples to marriage and relationship education services.

Apart from the Attorney-General's Department's review of the Civil Marriage Celebrant Program, FRSB has recently commissioned Donovan Research to undertake research into the development of a market awareness strategy to promote marriage

219 Attorney-General's Department, Legal Aid and Family Services Branch (1997) *Discussion Paper: Civil Marriage Celebrants Program* November: 5.

220 *ibid.* 6.

221 Attorney-General, Hon Daryl Williams, *Press release* 26 November 1997: 368.

and relationship education. Recognising that civil celebrants are an important target group in this strategy, Donovan Research conducted two focus group discussions with civil celebrants in Sydney and Melbourne. The objectives of these discussions were to determine civil celebrants' awareness of the existence of relationship education programs; the degree to which these programs are seen as relevant to their work; their knowledge of and attitudes towards these programs; and the extent and nature of their referring behaviours regarding them.²²² It is significant that many of the findings of these focus group sessions are confirmed in evidence given by civil celebrants to this inquiry.

Marriage and relationship educators' views on the role of the civil celebrant

Witnesses representing the various marriage and relationship funded agencies all confirmed the findings of the Committee's survey that referral to marriage education programs from civil celebrants is almost non-existent.²²³ Furthermore, they suggested that attempts at contact with celebrants have been futile.

Mr Ian Macdonald, Executive Director, Relationships Australia (Qld), told the Committee that his agency had recently written to 130 celebrants in south-east Queensland to invite them into an information session so that they could acquaint themselves with the range of services that Relationships Australia provides for family support. Of these 130 celebrants, only four responded to the invitation.²²⁴

Mr Frank Giggins, Coordinator, Relationship Education Program, and a representative of one of the newer non-church based agencies, suggested that in attempting to advertise its services with celebrants, his agency had received a very mixed response. A small proportion of civil celebrants had been very supportive, very interested and, in some instances, taking the initiative to say, 'How can we work together in using the resources that your program has to offer?' However with the majority of civil celebrants there had been very little response.²²⁵

Marriage educators generally felt that while celebrants should not be expected to provide education, they do have a responsibility and duty to tell people of the importance of marriage education. As Mr Bruce Findlay said:

if you are going to make money out of somebody by officiating at a ceremony as important as marriage, while you cannot be expected to give a guarantee about the quality of the marriage, you should be prepared to emphasise the importance of it and point people in the way of things like relationship

222 Donovan Research (1988) *Marriage and Relationship Education Market Research: Report to the Attorney General's Department Family Services Branch* 44.

223 Ms Anne Matuszek, *Transcript*, p. 99; Mr Bruce Findlay, *Transcript*, p. 242.

224 *Transcript*, p. 664.

225 *Transcript*, p. 216.

education, . . . and give them the choice of various courses that are available.²²⁶

Mr Don Burnard, Director, Family Relationships Institute, and a representative of a secular agency, suggested that celebrants' awareness of the different types of secular programs should be increased. Given that many couples choose a civil ceremony in order to avoid a religious focus, celebrants will be reluctant to refer couples to agencies with a religious affiliation. Rather, civil celebrants should motivate people to attend courses by making them aware of the different options available to them. Mr Burnard believes that the Attorney-General's Department should produce advertising material that clearly distinguishes between secular and religious programs.²²⁷

Marriage educators suggested that a major reason why celebrants are reluctant to be proactive in encouraging couples into pre-marriage education is that they do not want to jeopardise their financial interest in officiating at the marriage service. A celebrant's living is often involved in their work and if they ask people to attend workshops which involve a fee, then there is a fear that people will go to other celebrants who do not make any efforts to motivate them towards training programs.²²⁸

Civil celebrants' views on their role

Celebrants and representatives of celebrant organisations, in their evidence to the inquiry were generally supportive of the concept of marriage education and suggested that the lack of referral was more complex than just a financial motive or a fear of losing business. They defended their position saying that religious celebrants are able to promote marriage education more easily because they have a certain leverage over couples who wish to be married in their particular church. Civil celebrants do not have this same element of persuasion, as couples can easily choose another celebrant who does not insist on pre-marriage education. As Mr John Hill, of the Humanist Network of Marriage Celebrants said, 'Within the framework of a religious institution, you can almost mandate a referral. But this is not a mandated thing as it stands now.'²²⁹

Several witnesses pointed out that celebrants are required by the Marriage Act to hand to the parties the brochures produced by the Attorney-General's Department such as *Happily Ever . . . Before and After*, and *Organisations offering programs of marriage/relationship counselling, mediation and marriage education/enrichment*.²³⁰ However there was a general consensus amongst celebrants that couples take little

226 *Transcript*, p. 242.

227 *Transcript*, p. 437.

228 Mr Frank Giggins, *Transcript*, p. 219; Mr Don Burnard, *Transcript*, p. 437

229 *Transcript*, p. 344.

230 Mr Robert Stephenson, *Transcript*, p. 160.

notice of these brochures²³¹ and furthermore, celebrants believe these brochures are often out of date and of a poor quality.²³²

Some celebrants referred to the Attorney-General's Department project *Is love enough*. This was a 1995 project aimed at encouraging civil celebrants to promote marriage education amongst couples intending marriage. Celebrants and marriage educators told the Committee that generally this project had very limited success. Some witnesses suggested it was not well received by couples and was a waste of resources and funds.²³³

In defence of their position, celebrants such as Mrs Leonie Hill, President, Association of All Authorised Civil Marriage Celebrants Nationwide, did say that secular agencies such as Relationships New South Wales, had made no attempt to contact celebrants and inform them about their marriage education programs.²³⁴ Miss Elizabeth Seddon, Director, Relationships Australia, when asked about methods of improving links between marriage celebrants and secular agencies, told the Committee that couples planning marriage are only a small target group amongst the programs offered in Relationships Australia. While Relationships Australia supports pre-marriage education, the agency believes that it is only a small element in what needs to happen in the life stage of a couple's relationship.²³⁵

It is of note, that celebrants when discussing marriage education with the Committee, often used the terms marriage counselling and marriage education interchangeably. This confusion between the concept of counselling and education was also noted in the Donovan Research focus group discussions. Donovan Research argues that this is a significant finding, given that one of the barriers to consumers participating in education programs is their perception that such programs are for couples with 'problems'. If celebrants spontaneously use terms such as 'counselling' when raising issues of relationship education, this is likely to become associated with 'having problems' amongst consumers, making it less likely that they will seek education programs.²³⁶ Such a basic misuse of terminology also suggests that while celebrants

231 Mr Dally Messenger, *Transcript*, p. 150. Under s42(5A) of the Marriage Act, celebrants have a legal obligation to provide marrying couples with the Form 14A documentation. This documentation consists of the pamphlets *Happily Ever...Before and After* and *Helping your relationship*.

232 Mrs Leonie Hill, *Transcript*, p. 313. This was confirmed in the Donovan Research focus group discussions: Donovan Research (1988) *Marriage and Relationship Education Market Research: Report to the Attorney General's Department Family Services Branch*: 50.

233 Mr Robert Stephenson, *Transcript*, p. 163; Ms Anne Matuszek *Transcript*, p. 99; Mr Don Burnard, *Transcript*, p. 438, who said the program was jeopardised by the appointment of an additional 800 celebrants.

234 Mrs Leonie Hill, *Transcript*, p. 316.

235 *Transcript*, p. 52.

236 Donovan Research (1988) *Marriage and Relationship Education Market Research: Report to the Attorney General's Department Family Services Branch* 45.

are supportive of marriage education, they do not fully understand the preventive nature of it.

There was a general feeling amongst celebrants and celebrant organisations that many of their problems are attributable to a lack of training and to the poor administration of the civil celebrant program by the Department. Celebrants criticised the Department's appointment of an additional 800 celebrants in 1995, suggesting it created an oversupply and gave the profession a poor image within the community. They also pointed out that civil celebrant appointments are made without a screening or interview process, and without training or briefing by the Department.²³⁷ In comparing the role of religious and civil celebrants, Mr Dally Messenger, President, Australian Federation of Civil Celebrants, made the following observations:

[... the] clergy are qualified; clergy do go through courses of preparation for this kind of thing; clergy do have pastoral care courses and counselling courses. I am ashamed to tell you that the civil celebrant program has been so badly managed that we have never even had a briefing; we have never even had a letter from the Attorney-General saying, 'Please do your job well'. We have had no training, not even a week's course or a weekend seminar or anything. People, volunteers like me, have to pick up the slack and try to do this. I am a qualified counsellor, but I would not dare intrude with advice to a couple I have met for the first time and who did not come along to me as a counsellor. One reason is that counselling is something that has to be very carefully handled and you have to be doing it all the time, and your mind has to be fully on it to do it well; otherwise we can have a repeat of what has happened in the civil celebrant ranks; people have had disastrous advice from unqualified people. [. . .] Maybe your concerns could find effective fulfilment if, in the future, this committee, the Attorney-General and the government in general start screening celebrants carefully, start training them and taking an interest in the role. Once there is some level of qualification there then at some level they can buy into giving people advice. But right now it would be dangerous in the extreme.²³⁸

Celebrants and their organisations generally felt that they should not be obliged to provide marriage education counselling and they pointed to the dangers of untrained celebrants providing counselling and education programs to people who are often at a very vulnerable time in lives.²³⁹ As Mrs Leonie Hill told the Committee, when people are vulnerable they often become dependant on the particular person guiding them through that stage of their life. Therefore, people who are untrained in counselling and marriage preparation could end up giving the couple the wrong information or

237 Mr John Hill, *Transcript*, p. 346; Mr Samuel Helprin, *Transcript*, p. 335.

238 *Transcript*, p. 158.

239 Mrs Leonie Hill, *Transcript*, p. 314.

pointing them in the wrong direction.²⁴⁰ Witnesses were in agreement that celebrants should not be offering marriage and relationship education without appropriate training.

Many celebrants and representatives of civil celebrant organisations suggested that celebrants should undertake some sort of competency training before appointment. Mr Dally Messenger told the Committee that the Victorian University of Technology has recently taken up the challenge of training for celebrants by offering a graduate diploma in marriage celebrant work. However, Mr Messenger and other witnesses also said that training courses for marriage celebrant work need not necessarily be at graduate diploma level. Rather, they agreed that there ought to be some certification by some independent educational body prior to a person being approved as a civil celebrant.²⁴¹

Mr Robert Stephenson, President of the Association of Civil Marriage Celebrants of Victoria, said that his association also strongly supports the establishment of a training program for new celebrants and ongoing training for established celebrants. He told the Committee that his association does try to provide professional development in terms of workshops and seminars throughout Victoria and Tasmania, but he believes the Attorney-General's Department should also play a role in this area.

Mr Stephenson told the Committee that the Department has a responsibility to give leadership so that the role of celebrant is seen as an appointment to provide a service to the community, rather than a means of making money.

Of late, there is too much emphasis on the role of civil marriage celebrants being an industry rather than being individuals who will make a positive contribution to the establishment and maintenance of marriage and the family in the Australian community and be suitable persons to represent the Commonwealth in this role. We believe that there is more leadership required from Canberra. Basically, all we receive is a letter of appointment, and nothing else.²⁴²

In summary, there was a consensus in the evidence from celebrants and celebrant organisations that there should be some level of training required in order for a person to be appointed as a civil celebrant. Whether this training should be a certificate, a diploma or some other form of training was not clear from the evidence.²⁴³

In relation to the civil celebrant's role in the provision of marriage education, several witnesses spoke of their frustration with the current departmental regulations governing this area. Some celebrants who are also accredited marriage educators told

240 *ibid.*

241 *Transcript*, p. 159.

242 *Transcript*, p. 160.

243 Mr Robert Stephenson, *Transcript*, p. 162; Mr Robert Ross, *Transcript*, p. 163.

the Committee that under the current regulations, they are precluded from combining their work as marriage educators and marriage celebrants. As they pointed out, religious celebrants are not subject to the same restrictions.²⁴⁴

It was suggested that such strict regulation dated back to a time when there was a fear that celebrants without training in marriage education would undertake counselling with the potential for disastrous results. Almost as a survival response, the government put a general embargo on all civil celebrants performing marriage education and counselling.²⁴⁵

Ms Affie Adagio from the Humanist Celebrant Network is a trained marriage and family therapist as well a civil marriage celebrant. She told the Committee that when people come to see her about officiating at their marriage, she gives them the pamphlets and tell them to go to a marriage counselling relationship agency but she is unable to offer marriage preparation training. As Ms Adagio said, it would be more helpful to the couple if she as their celebrant could also offer them assistance with marriage education programs.²⁴⁶

Mr Ian Macdonald said that when he applied to become a civil celebrant in Australia, he was declined on the basis of his occupation as a marriage counsellor. Somehow, some conflict of interest was perceived. As Mr Macdonald quite reasonably said, having people with experience in the area and people who work with couples at that vital stage in their life, were qualities that should be considered desirable in people wishing to become marriage celebrants.²⁴⁷

Ms Adagio, Mr Macdonald and other witnesses all agreed that the current regulations precluding marriage educators working as celebrants are a wasteful use of resources and inhibit involvement by marriage celebrants in the promotion of marriage education.²⁴⁸

The Committee's views on the role of civil celebrants in promoting marriage and relationship education

In the Attorney-General's Department's discussion paper on the Civil Marriage Celebrants Program, it is suggested that 'celebrants play an important role in Government's objective to foster quality family relationships particularly in their capacity to raise couples awareness about services which would help them develop

244 Mr Sam Helprin, *Transcript*, p. 344; Ms Affie Adagio, *Transcript*, p. 345.

245 Mr John Robson, *Transcript*, p. 589.

246 *Transcript*, p. 342.

247 Mr Ian Macdonald, *Transcript*, p. 664.

248 Mr John Robson, *Transcript*, p. 589.

stronger relationships and reduce the risk of future relationship breakdown and divorce'.²⁴⁹

The Committee believes that such a goal is commendable. However, based on evidence received during the inquiry and the Committee's marriage education survey results, the Committee seriously questions whether civil celebrants do play a role in fostering quality family relationships. While celebrants are in a position to promote marriage and relationship education, evidence and research strongly suggests that for a variety of reasons this is not happening.

The Committee commends the Attorney-General's Department for its review of the civil celebrant program and the work it has commissioned into marriage and relationship education market research. It hopes that the recommendations of the Donovan Research report relating to a communications strategy for civil celebrants will be implemented.

The Committee notes that there is already a legislative obligation on civil celebrants to provide marrying couples with documentation about marriage education.²⁵⁰ It suggests that future training programs emphasise the importance of this obligation. The Committee also acknowledges the evidence of celebrants who were critical of this marriage documentation and suggests that the Department should ensure that marriage documentation distributed to celebrants is kept up-to-date and made more relevant to marrying couples.

The Committee agrees with witnesses who suggested that there should be greater co-operation between secular marriage education agencies and civil celebrants. The Committee believes that celebrants' reluctance to refer may be partly based on an ignorance of the availability of secular programs and a belief that couples marrying in civil ceremonies are unwilling to attend religious affiliated marriage education programs. In this regard, it is disappointing that many secular agencies have not promoted the pre-marriage inventories such as FOCCUS and PREPARE. Indeed one agency, in reply to the Committee's survey asked 'What is an inventory?' Given the fact that the inventory programs are flexible, tailored to individual couples, and require less infrastructure than group programs, it is not surprising that they have become popular.

The Committee encourages all marriage education agencies to provide inventory programs and for the Attorney-General's Department and the proposed Council for Marriage Relationships and Parenting to promote their usefulness to civil celebrants.

Recommendation 21

249 Attorney-General's Department, Legal Aid and Family Services Branch (1997) *Discussion Paper: Civil Marriage Celebrants Program* November: 34.

250 Section 42(5A) of the Marriage Act.

The Committee recommends that advertising material available through the Attorney-General's Department and the proposed training courses alert civil celebrants to the range of secular programs available.

Recommendation 22

The Committee recommends that the proposed Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council²⁵¹ work towards establishing greater links between secular agencies and civil celebrants.

The Committee believes that based on the evidence a priority for the Department is to implement a competency training program for all current and prospective civil celebrants.

Recommendation 23

As part of that program, the Committee recommends that civil celebrants must undertake a course of training about marriage and relationships prior to obtaining registration. Existing celebrants must also undertake such a course within the next two years.

The Committee notes with approval the Donovan Research report recommendation that civil celebrants be given opportunities to receive training on relationship education issues. That report also recommends that this training could be provided by service providers in the relationships education field, which would have the important secondary effect of increasing contact between celebrants and relationship education programs.²⁵²

Recommendation 24

The Committee reiterates the Donovan Research report recommendation that service providers in the relationships education field provide training programs for civil marriage celebrants.

The Committee acknowledges the concerns of some celebrants, that the provision of marriage and relationship training for marrying couples should not be made a mandatory requirement of the work of civil celebrants. The Committee realises that some celebrants may not be particularly suited to this work. It agrees with evidence to the inquiry that suggests that the primary role of celebrants in this area should be to positively and knowledgably refer marrying couples to appropriate marriage and relationship education programs.

The Committee is sympathetic to the concerns of some witnesses about current regulations that preclude trained marriage educators from combining this work with their role of civil celebrant. The Committee agrees that these regulations are wasteful

251 Recommended in Chapter 11.

252 Donovan Research (1988) *Marriage and Relationship Education Market Research: Report to the Attorney General's Department Family Services Branch* 55.

of resources and that competency in marriage education training would in fact be a desirable attribute for marriage celebrants. The Committee notes that the roles of celebrant and educator are successfully combined by many religious celebrants.

Recommendation 25

The Committee recommends that the proposed Marriage and Relationships and Parenting Council investigate ways of ensuring that adequate safeguards are put in place so that the potential conflict of interest between the dual roles of celebrant and educator can be avoided.

Subject to such safeguards being established, the Committee recommends that departmental regulations be changed so that civil celebrants who are also accredited marriage and relationship educators may perform the dual roles of providing marriage education and officiating at the wedding ceremony of marrying couples.

International developments

Canada: Innovative programs

Marriage and family education has been gradually developed in Canada over the past decade. Much of the innovation has been driven by the British Columbia Council for the Family, a non-profit organisation formed by government, religious and community leaders in 1977. The Council published a marriage preparation manual in 1980, developed accreditation for a marriage preparation courses in 1983-84, conducted a consultation with academic and government officials in 1985, and held a province-wide consultation and conference in 1988.²⁵³ The Council has subsequently published newsletters for marriage educators, sponsored marriage preparation programs, and promoted marriage education in the province.²⁵⁴

Marriage and family education has also been promoted by other Canadian organisations, including Family Service Canada which established the Canadian Family Life Educators group.²⁵⁵

NZ: Establishing a national marriage education network

Following the participation of New Zealand marriage educators in a series of Australian marriage education conferences, a New Zealand conference was inaugurated in 1995.²⁵⁶

A network of marriage educators has formed in New Zealand, and an annual conference has been conducted. The 1997 conference was opened by the Governor-General, Sir Michael Hardie Boys, and included Professor Denis Ladbrook and Dr Barbara Markey on the program.²⁵⁷

UK: Preventive programs

253 British Columbia Council for the Family (1988) *Special Marriage Preparation Newsletter* Vancouver: BC Council for the Family.

254 See for example, *Marriage Education News* BC Council for the Family.

255 See, Family Service Canada *Let's Talk Families* newsletter, and the Canadian Family Life Educators *Putting Families First* newsletter Ottawa: Family Service Canada.

256 'Inaugural conference in Auckland' (1995) *Threshold* 47: 7. See also, Jackie Brown-Haysom (1995) 'Society promotes divorce, not marriage education ...' *Threshold* 47: 8-9.

257 'Marriage and family in the contemporary world' (1997) *Threshold* 57: 20. See also, M Hardie Boys (1997) 'The need for virtue in contemporary society' *Threshold* 57: 21-22.

Innovative projects aimed at preventing marriage breakdown and improving access to marriage support services have benefited from \$1 million of funding announced by the Lord Chancellor.²⁵⁸

The Lord Chancellor launched a Marriage Taskforce in 1995 to identify the availability of marriage support services, and how these met the needs of couples. Following extensive evaluation of how such services could be supported, he announced in late 1996 that money would be available for pilot projects with the potential to reduce the incidence of marriage breakdown, and invited marriage organisations to tender for funds.

Thirteen projects were selected, and began operation in 1997. Those selected included telephone hotlines, funding for a national marriage week, marriage preparation programs, including one for couples who do not marry in a church, a project to provide marital support for couples who have had a child, and marriage preparation programs for certain ethnic communities.²⁵⁹

According to Lord McKay, the aims of the program are threefold: They are to

- Promote a positive and realistic image of marriage;
- Raise the public's awareness of marriage support services and reduce stigma attached to seeking help; and
- Test the effectiveness of different forms of intervention in preventing marital breakdown.

All pilot projects are being monitored to measure their effectiveness in meeting the aims of the program.

USA: Reforming marriage and divorce law

A number of submissions suggested that the rate of marital breakdown was a consequence of the introduction of no-fault divorce law in Australia.²⁶⁰ In their view, making divorce more difficult would reduce marital breakdown.

While a review of the Family Law Act was outside the Committee's brief, the Committee noted developments in divorce law reform in other jurisdictions. In the US, at least 20 States have introduced bills to change divorce laws, either by extending waiting periods, repealing no-fault divorce, mandating counselling, or encouraging pre-marriage education.²⁶¹ The first State to pass such laws was Louisiana.²⁶²

258 'UK marriage support' (1998) *Threshold* 58: 5.

259 *ibid.*

260 See Chapter 4.

261 KJ Walters (1997) 'Marriage southern style' *Threshold* 57: 13–15.

262 Louisiana Legislature House Bill 756 signed into law on 15 July 1997 as *Act 1380 of 1997*.

Louisiana's covenant marriage laws

Louisiana's new law allows couples to choose between the existing marriage regime based on no-fault divorce, and a new regime of covenant marriage.²⁶³ The State's covenant marriage requires couples to swear they will live together forever as husband and wife. The partners must disclose to each other 'everything which could adversely affect' their decision to marry. Both must sign a notarised affidavit, swearing they have talked about the nature, purposes and responsibilities of marriage during their premarital counselling. They are legally required to seek marital counselling if problems arise in their marriage.²⁶⁴

Under existing laws, a divorce can be granted in Louisiana if the spouses have been living apart for six months or more, or the other spouse has committed adultery, or the other spouse has committed a felony and has been sentenced to death or imprisonment at hard labour.

Under the covenant marriage provisions, divorce is more difficult to obtain. In order to obtain a legal separation, a spouse must prove:

- the other spouse committed adultery;
- the other spouse has committed a felony and has been sentenced to death or imprisonment at hard labour;
- the other spouse had abandoned the matrimonial domicile for a period of one year and constantly refuses to return;
- the other spouse has physically or sexually abused the spouse seeking the divorce or a child of one of the spouses;
- the spouses have been living separate and apart continuously without reconciliation for a period of two years; or
- on account of habitual intemperance of the other spouse, or excesses, cruel treatment, or outrages of the other spouse, if such habitual intemperance, or such ill-treatment is of such a nature as to render their living together insupportable.

If the spouses have lived apart since legal separation, they may obtain a divorce after a further period of separation of 18 months if there is a minor child or children of the marriage; one year if separation was granted for abuse of a child of either spouse; and one year in all other cases.

Couples who are already married may execute a declaration of intent to designate their marriage a covenant marriage. They must sign a recitation and an affidavit after receiving counselling. The counsellor must attest to the counselling.

Although there has been considerable debate in the US about the legislation,²⁶⁵ the requirement for premarital education has been widely supported.²⁶⁶

263 id.

264 T Jones (1998) 'The commitment' *Washington Post Magazine* 10 May.

265 See for example, J Loconte (1998) 'I'll stand bayou' *Policy Review* May/June.

Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act

The Florida legislature passed a Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act in April 1998.²⁶⁷ The Act's preamble summarises the purport of the legislation, passed 91 to 16 in the House and unanimously by that State's Senate:

Just as the family is the foundation of society, the marital relationship is the foundation of a family. Consequently, strengthening marriages can only lead to stronger families, children and communities, as well as a stronger economy. An inability to cope with stress from both internal and external sources leads to significantly higher incidents of domestic violence, child abuse, absenteeism, medical costs, learning and social deficiencies, and divorce. Relationship skills can facilitate communication between parties to a marriage and assist couples in avoiding conflict. Once relationship skills are learned, they are generalised to parenting, the workplace, schools, neighbourhoods and civic relationships. By reducing conflict and increasing communication, stresses can be diminished and coping can be furthered. When effective coping exists, domestic violence and its effect of children are diminished. The state has a compelling interest in educating its citizens with regard to marriage and, if contemplated, the effects of divorce.

The Bill includes four new requirements:

- High school students must take a course in marriage and relationship skill-based education;
- Engaged couples are encouraged to take a 'premarital education course' of at least four hours duration. It is suggested that the topics include conflict resolution, communication skills, financial responsibilities, children and parenting, and data on problems married couples face. Those who take the course receive a \$32.50 reduction in the cost of their marriage license, which normally costs between \$88 and \$200, depending on the county;
- Each couple applying for a marriage license will also be given a booklet prepared by the Florida Bar Association to inform them of 'the rights and responsibilities under Florida law of marital partners to each other and to their children, both during a marriage and upon its dissolution.'
- Couples with children who file for divorce must take a Parent education and family stabilisation course that covers the legal and emotional impact of divorce on adults and children, financial responsibility, laws on child abuse or neglect and they must learn conflict resolution skills.

266 KJ Walters *supra* 15.

267 MJ McManus (1998) 'Florida passes nation's most sweeping reform of marriage law' *Ethics and Religion* syndicated column 16 May. See also, K Peterson (1998) 'Wedlock 101? Florida schools may require it' *USA Today* 21 May; and J Hallifax (1998) 'Chiles signs marriage ed bill.' *Associated Press* 12 June.

Arizona: New covenant marriage law

Arizona's legislature voted on 20 May 1998 to create a covenant marriage law like that pioneered in Louisiana. The law creates a two-tiered system of marriage licenses. Couples can choose a standard marriage certificate, which allows a no-fault divorce with 60 days separation, or a covenant marriage certificate in which the expectation is that the marriage is for life. The couple agree under the covenant marriage to seek professional help should problems arise in their marriage. The legislation includes drug, alcohol or emotional abuse as a fault-based ground for divorce. It also allows those in a covenant marriage to obtain a no-fault divorce if both partners want a divorce.²⁶⁸

Similar legislation has passed in one house in both Oklahoma and Georgia, but failed in the other house.

Other developments

The legislation is part of a renewed focus on marriage in the US. The American Bar Association has sponsored a relationships education program for high school students. Marital educators have formed a new association dedicated to preventative measures;²⁶⁹ and policy makers have begun to turn their attention to preventive programs.²⁷⁰

A marriage savers movement has prospered in a number of cities across the United States, in which pastors, judges and other marriage celebrants have refused to marry couples unless they have participated in pre-marriage education programs.²⁷¹ Although reports of early success in avoiding marital breakdown require further research,²⁷² there is clearly a movement towards encouraging marriage preparation. Every diocese of the Catholic Church in the US, for example, requires couples marrying in that church to participate in a marriage education program.²⁷³

As Kathleen Walters concluded recently:

268 M McManus (1998) 'Arizona adopts covenant marriage law' Coalition for Marriage Family and Couples Education (CMFCE) **webmail**: 24 May.

269 Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education (CMFCE): <www.smartmarriages.com>

270 id.; See also, C Wetzstein (1998) 'Congress urged to provide economic, social incentives to preserve family' *Washington Post*: 15 April.

271 MJ McManus (1993) *Marriage savers* Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan. See also, D Southwell (1998) 'Churches aim to build better marriages' *Chicago Sun Times* 17 April.

272 DS Browning et al (1997) *From culture wars to common ground* Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press 309.

273 B Markey *supra*.

It is too early to tell what the outcome of these developments will be for the United States. Will the Louisiana legislation be the fore-runner of a national movement, just as the 1969 California law changed divorce laws throughout the country? Louisiana State University Professor Katherine Spaht, who drafted the law, has had inquiries from 12 other States about similar legislation. Alternatively, it may lead to further concentration on strategies to prevent unstable marriages happening in the first place. One thing is certain: the nation is set for a long debate and experimentation about ways to strengthen marriage and family life. As Ira Lurvey, past president of the American Bar Association Family Law Section says: 'Society is dissatisfied with the way things are now.'²⁷⁴

These developments are of considerable interest to observers of marriage and family law in Australia. While it is too early to measure their impact, the Committee believes that the developments should be monitored in Australia.

Recommendation 26

The Committee recommends that the Attorney-General report to Parliament in three years time on the developments that have occurred in family law in the United States, particularly in the implementation of covenant marriage laws and the provision of pre-marital education.

Education in rural and remote areas

Evidence to the Committee also addressed the circumstances of people in rural and remote areas of Australia. The absence of nearby services, difficult economic conditions, and the loss of young people to cities are among the factors present in many regions and communities. A number of key factors have an impact on the delivery of services, including:

- lack of economies of scale and big distances between communities;
- reluctance to access counselling and relationship support services;
- problems in recruiting, retaining and supporting service providers in the field; and
- difficulties for service providers of living and working in close knit communities.²⁷⁵

In 1996, the Legal Aid and Family Services Division of the Attorney-General's Department awarded a consultancy to explore options for effective distance education model(s) of service delivery for people in rural and remote areas of Australia as part of the marriage/relationship education program.

274 KJ Walters *supra* 15.

275 F Allen et al (1998) 'Relationship education for couples in rural and remote Australia by distance delivery' paper. See also, (1998) *Threshold* 59 (forthcoming) for a report of the project.

A survey of agencies found that the service to these areas 'was frequently ad hoc and patchy, with very few distance delivered programs.'²⁷⁶ The researchers found that very little of the material used in current relationship education programs 'is specifically designed and developed with rural and remote couples and distance delivery in mind' and therefore unlikely to be suitable in meeting the initial needs of couples.²⁷⁷

While these needs involved effective communication, they had a practical dimension:

Couples primarily view their needs in terms of the practical problems they face like coping with shift work or the difficulties caused by drought or financial pressures. Subsequently, they may talk about communication needs but often in terms of 'talking about problems'. They do not talk about their needs in terms of 'marriage enrichment' 'intimacy needs' or 'relationship enhancement'. This suggests strongly the need to develop and deliver educational services which focus on the issues couples are concerned about while also providing an opportunity to acquire the core relationship competencies. This 'client focussed' approach appears at odds with some current practice in the design and delivery of relationship education elsewhere.²⁷⁸

The consultants have suggested that the purpose of relationship education programs for rural and remote couples should be to develop and enhance the capacity of all couples in rural and remote parts of Australia to better self manage their relationship over time to the benefit of themselves, their children, their families and their community.²⁷⁹ They recommended that the Government's funding, support and directing of this program be on the basis that they are supporting the establishment of a relatively undeveloped 'human service industry' and that over time it has the potential to become more self sustaining.

Importantly, the consultants draft recommendation was that 'program activities be presented and promoted as normal educational activities not directly associated with the ambience of personal problems, failure and pathology, as is often associated with the field of relationship counselling and therapy.'²⁸⁰

The Committee supports this recommendation. As indicated elsewhere, the Committee is of the opinion that a clear distinction between education on one hand , and therapy and counselling on the other is desirable.

276 F Allen & M McKay (1998) 'Development of relationship education for farm couples in rural and remote Australia' paper.

277 F Allen et al supra 5.

278 *ibid.* 3.

279 *ibid.* 6.

280 *ibid.* 8.

The Committee notes that the consultancy work is continuing, including the development of materials and resources for people in rural and remote areas of Australia:

The model has been developed is one where mentors will be trained. They have a manual, so there will be uniform training for the mentors who will be positioned all round Australia in rural and remote areas. There will be a videotape or two. There will be short videotapes demonstrating relationship conflict resolution and that sort of thing. There will probably be an audio tape. There will be a booklet²⁸¹

The Committee welcomes this development.

Domestic violence

As indicated above in Chapter 3, the incidence of domestic violence in the community is unacceptable. Many individuals and organisations also submitted to the inquiry that domestic violence was a factor in marriage and relationship breakdown.²⁸²

The topic of domestic violence was considered by the Keys Young evaluation of the marriage and relationship education sub-program 'because the terms of reference . . . required researchers to explore the impact of domestic violence on the provision of marriage and relationship education programs.'²⁸³

The evaluation noted three types of organisational responses to the issue:

- where domestic violence is not recognised as an appropriate issue for pre-marriage and marriage enrichment programs, either generally, or in the programs provided by that particular organisation;
- where domestic violence has been recognised as an issue, but organisations are still in the early stages of developing appropriate responses;
- where domestic violence has been recognised as a core issue requiring staff development, a review of programs and service delivery models, and the establishment of protocols and procedures specifically for Marriage and Relationship Education Programs to ensure the safety of victims, and appropriate referral and support for both partners.²⁸⁴

The team conducting the evaluation concluded that most agencies were in the second category.

281 Ms Margaret Newman, *Transcript*, pp. 970-971.

282 See Chapter 4 above.

283 Keys Young *supra* 93.

284 *ibid.* 94.

In their recommendations, the evaluation team proposed:

- that knowledge of, and willingness to address domestic violence, be considered a core competency for educators; and
- that beyond the provision of appropriate information, advice and referral, the task of assisting couples or individuals to develop strategies to deal with personal experience of domestic violence should be recognised as a tertiary level intervention. In most cases, generic education programs provided at primary or secondary level of intervention are not suitable interventions for couples currently experiencing domestic violence. These couples should be screened out, and offered appropriate advice, information, referral and support.²⁸⁵

The evaluation team did not indicate how this should be undertaken, other than suggesting that protocols be in place.²⁸⁶ The Committee supports the implementation of agency protocols.

While protocols for dealing with participants presenting with indications of violence in their relationships are desirable, consideration about preventive approaches also requires attention.

In a recent review of the subject, Michael Johnson suggests that there are at least two dynamics at work in violence in intimate relationships.²⁸⁷ The two perspectives are often referred to as the family violence perspective and the feminist perspective. Johnson calls the feminist approach as patriarchal terrorism – violence that is a result of ‘patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control “their” women. It is a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threat, isolation and other control tactics.’²⁸⁸

In what Johnson terms common couple violence, families experience occasional outbursts of violence from either partner or both. This dynamic is one in which conflict occasionally ‘gets out of hand’ leading usually to more ‘minor’ forms of violence, and much more rarely than patriarchal violence escalating into serious, sometimes even life-threatening, forms of violence. This is not to suggest that common couple violence is not a major concern: the use of the term ‘minor’ by Johnson is an attempt to compare rather than excuse. Some differences have been noted between the two types of violence. Common couple violence is much less frequent; escalation is less likely, and de-escalation may occur; and reciprocity is more likely between partners.

285 *ibid.* 157.

286 *ibid.* 101.

287 MP Johnson (1995) ‘Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women’ *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57: 283–294.

288 *ibid.* 284.

In terms of control, common couple violence is an intermittent response to the conflicts of everyday life – motivated by a need to control a specific situation, not a more general need to be in charge of the relationship. There is not a pattern in these relationships of one party trying to gain general control over their partner. Patriarchal terrorism, on the other hand, is all about total relationship control – by any and all necessary means. It is about a need to control, and to display control. The latter suggests that even if the man is in control, he continues in the violent acts as a demonstration of his control.²⁸⁹

Marriage educators have noted the importance of recognising the difference between the two, otherwise strategies employed will not be appropriate: ‘Policies will be set; educational programs won’t present the whole view, and therapeutic interventions will be ineffective and inappropriate if we assume couple violence as following one pattern.’²⁹⁰

The Canadian educator Rosanne Farnden Lyster comments on consequences for marriage education programs:

Common couple violence suggests that there is something in the couple dynamic’ likely related to the ways in which conflict and anger are handled. Programs which address effective conflict resolution and anger management skills may well be of use in preventing this type of violence, particularly if one is clear about violence never being acceptable, and that there are other means of resolving differences. Couples attending the program who are experiencing this type of violence as part of their relationship need to realise that change is possible, and that they are beyond the primary prevention stage. They need to be encouraged to make plans for how to make their relationship one that is healthy and life-giving, and made aware that change will be more likely for them if they seek appropriate intervention-type assistance.

In terms of patriarchal terrorism, prevention programs would do well to outline what is meant by this, the types of control tactics that women need to be aware of, the subtleties involved, as well as the realities of it (ie. This type of violence does get worse, it doesn’t go away, the cycle involved). A checklist of attitudes and behaviours might be an in-session activity. Women in these types of relationships need to be aware that they too are past the point where a prevention program is going to be of assistance. Providers need to be aware of the community resources that they could refer a woman in this situation to.²⁹¹

289 RF Lyster (1997/98) ‘Apples and oranges: Another look at couple violence’ *Concerning Couples* Winter Issue.

290 id.

291 ibid.

'If there are different patterns that arise from different societal roots and interpersonal human dynamics' writes Johnson, 'we must make distinctions in order to maximise our effectiveness in moving towards the goal of peace in our private lives.'²⁹²

The Committee notes that these are issues for the field when addressing violence in relationships.

Indigenous Australians

Recent studies indicate that very few Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders access marriage and relationships counselling and education services funded through the Family Relationships Services Program.²⁹³ In view of this under-representation and in order to gain a better understanding of the particular needs of indigenous Australians, the Committee travelled to Darwin and to Bathurst Island and spoke to members of the local indigenous communities.

At Bathurst Island, Mr Barry Puruntatameri and Mr Terry O'Neill, both of the Nguui Community Government Council, told the Committee that the incidence of marital breakdown amongst indigenous Australians is very high and that this has a detrimental effect on local community life.²⁹⁴ Witnesses in Darwin suggested that the imposition of Western values on indigenous culture means that traditional methods of selecting marriage partners are being ignored. This results in a loss of family structure and support which often leads to marital breakdown.²⁹⁵

Mr Peter Fisher, Director, Anglicare Top End, commended the Attorney-General's Department for providing organisations such as Anglicare with funding to actually consult and work with the Aboriginal community on ways of structuring programs that are culturally appropriate for indigenous Australians.²⁹⁶ Mr Fisher said that programs reinforcing and teaching Aboriginal culture should be available for young people and equally importantly these programs should be guided and managed by Aboriginal people.²⁹⁷

The Committee agrees with evidence that stresses the importance of establishing programs that are culturally appropriate for indigenous Australians. It commends the

292 Johnson *supra* 293.

293 An example of these studies is the *1993 Marriage Counselling Census: summary of results*, conducted by the Attorney-General's Department. The Committee notes that while participation by indigenous Australians in marriage and relationship counselling programs is less than one per cent of total clients, their participation in Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy and Family Skills programs is greater than three and four per cent respectively. See, Family Relationships Services Program *1996-97 Statistical Summary*: 9.

294 *Transcript*, pp. 2-3.

295 Mr Murabuda Wurramarrba, *Transcript*, pp. 893-894.

296 At the time of this particular public hearing, (7 November 1997) the program was still at the consultative stage.

297 *Transcript*, pp. 898-899.

Attorney-General's Department for funding organisations such as Anglicare so that they can assist in establishing programs in family skills and relationships training which are developed and managed by Aboriginal communities. It is hoped that these new projects will increase access by Aborigines to services funded by the Family and Relationships Services Program. The Committee believes that programs for Aborigines must be focused on supporting cultural structures which indigenous Australians consider important for improving family and marriage stability.

Innovative projects funding

The Committee recognises that there are new approaches to marriage and relationship education being developed from time to time. These approaches may be directed to specific communities,²⁹⁸ or involve a new program. The Committee notes, for example, the difficulties, now being addressed, of women from particular countries being brought to Australia as brides and the adverse consequences for many of them.

In line with the primary recommendations of this report that programs of marriage and relationship education be separately funded through a combination of base grants and a service delivery component, the Committee also supports the provision of a special fund for innovative projects, and for exceptional circumstances, such as the provision of programs where extreme distance or particular socio-economic conditions are a factor.

The Committee believes that these projects should have clearly enunciated objectives and should be funded for a limited period of two years, so that proper assessment can be made of their efficacy.

Recommendation 27

The Committee recommends that a fund for innovative and exceptional circumstances projects in marriage and relationship education be established by the Attorney-General's Department.

Funding of other Family Relationship Services Programs

The Committee heard evidence expressing considerable disquiet about the funding of Family Relationship Services Programs. The evidence, and the Committee's analysis of it, is referred to in discussion about the marriage and relationship education program.

The Committee believes that a system of base grants and a direct service delivery fee should be implemented for other Family Relationships Services Programs, namely family and relationship counselling, family and child mediation, adolescent mediation

298 See for example, L Crisante (1998) 'family relationships after migration' *Threshold* 58: 16–20; and L Heitritter (1998) 'Marriage education across cultures' *CMFCE webnews*, 23 May.

and family therapy, and family skills training. This funding mechanism should be established in consultation with the agencies and the proposed new Councils, with a view to implementation in 1999-2000.

Recommendation 28

The Committee recommends that a funding scheme comprising base grants and a service delivery component be established for each of the other sub-programs under the Office of Legal Aid and Family Services.

The Committee recommends that the Attorney-General's Department report to the Parliament each year full details of all funding to agencies for each of the Family Relationships Service sub-programs. The report should include details similar to that set out in the survey of marriage and relationship education contained in appendices to this report.

The Committee recommends that the Australian National Audit Office undertake a financial and performance audit of the Family Relationships Services Program in two years time.

A postscript: The Keys Young Evaluation

The Attorney-General's Department selected a firm, Keys Young, in 1997 to undertake an evaluation of the marriage and relationship education program. According to the terms of reference of the study, key issues to be researched were to be the degree to which current services are, or need to be:

- informed by an understanding of the different nature, types and stages of relationships and, in particular, the development and nature of both 'successful' and 'at-risk' relationships;
- incorporating an awareness of key life transitions - including issues such as retirement, divorce/separation, empty nest, step-parenting and so on;
- developing services to meet the needs of different types of relationships and the needs of different target groups such as people from different cultural backgrounds;
- aware of the implications of family or domestic violence on the conduct and content of education programs; matching current community values and expectations about marriage and relationships; and
- cost-effectiveness.²⁹⁹

The evaluation was scheduled to be completed in mid 1997. The final report was delivered in December.

299 'Marriage education evaluation' (1997) *Threshold* 54: 3-4.

The Committee had the opportunity to read the final report, to discuss it at length with Keys Young personnel and officers of the Attorney-General's Department, and to seek further advice from those engaged in the field of marriage education, both at an academic and practical level.

The Committee had been hopeful that the evaluation would assist this inquiry, but that has proven to be largely illusory, as the following observations indicate.

First, the evaluation failed to adequately address the first key issue, namely the nature of both 'successful' and 'at risk' relationships. As the early chapters of this report indicate, there has been considerable study and research into the factors that contribute to relationships that are on-going, and those that fail. Very little of this research is referred to in the evaluation. As a consequence, educational approaches to these factors are not evaluated.

Furthermore, the researchers seemed unaware of a large body of research about marital function and dysfunction, and the effects of marriage and relationship education.³⁰⁰ Asked about the body of research about the health impacts of marriage and separation, the research team replied that it was outside their terms of reference.³⁰¹ Asked why a series of relevant books and studies had not been referred to in the literature review, one of the researchers replied that 'there were only 20 days allocated to the whole literature review.'³⁰²

Secondly, the evaluation reported some of the literature in a misleading manner. For example, reference was made to Giblin's research into marriage enrichment programs without indicating there are considerable differences between marriage enrichment as reported by her in the United States and marriage education as practised in Australia. Nor was Giblin's key finding that claims that 'marriage enrichment is ineffective' are inaccurate.³⁰³ In other cases, the most up-to-date literature was not mentioned in the report.

Thirdly, the evaluation failed to comprehensively survey the field. There was no accurate breakdown of courses and programs from which some determination could be made of 'the effectiveness of funded organisations,' or the 'comparative costs of providing the various marriage and relationship education services.'³⁰⁴ Perhaps most disappointingly, the evaluation failed to note the substantial growth in the use of pre-marital inventories, such as PREPARE and FOCCUS, and to comment on these developments for the future of the program. As a consequence, the evaluation

300 *Transcript*, pp. 920–925.

301 *ibid.* p. 922.

302 *ibid.* p. 921.

303 *ibid.* pp. 923–924.

304 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of the marriage and relationship education sub-program* Sydney 2.

presents, at best, an incomplete picture of marriage and relationship education in Australia.

Fourthly, the evaluation appears to proceed on the basis of certain stereotypes and preconceived notions about marriage that do not accord with changing times. For example, the report makes references to traditional marriage and modern marriage. Asked whether the reference to a traditional marriage was to a marriage that occurs within a church and where the partners assume more conventional gender roles, the researchers replied 'yes'. This distinction was used in the report to suggest that marriage education programs substantially differed if they were conducted by church-affiliated agencies. Yet evidence to the Committee indicated that the distinction doesn't reflect modern marriages, nor the courses conducted by both church and secular agencies. The evidence suggested that the content of most pre-marriage programs, for example, is substantially the same, regardless of the affiliations of the agency.

The example illustrates another difficulty with the report, namely the failure by the team to comprehensively analyse the various approaches adopted by different agencies to marriage and relationship education. Apart from speaking to a range of 'key informants' and conducting some focus groups, the team did not observe programs, nor examine in any detail the course notes and work books used in them. Given that part of the brief to the team was to "identify innovative and effective marriage and relationship education services, and determine their relevance as 'best practice' models for use as benchmarks for comparison and direction in the sub-program,"³⁰⁵ this was a major oversight. Indeed, the innovative programs identified were self-reported.

The evaluation also uses language in an inconsistent manner in the report. For example, references are made to primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention, but it was conceded by the team upon questioning, that these terms were used in different ways in the report.³⁰⁶

The Committee is also concerned about the manner in which the report was undertaken and written. In many places, the evaluation team refer to 'some informants' for a particular point of view, without identifying them, the context of the remark, nor the agency or organisation with which they are affiliated. There can be little confidence in an approach that fails to identify comments from individuals in the field, nor the proportion of the field that support a particular proposition being advanced.

The Committee is disappointed with the quality of the evaluation. The research is incomplete, the conclusions of questionable validity, and the recommendations lacking in sufficient reasoning.

305 id.

306 *Transcript*, pp. 933–934.

While it is not the task of the Committee to determine why such a report was presented, it does raise questions about such evaluations in future. Although there was a project management steering committee, it would appear that this committee met rarely. Nor is it clear that any recommendations from the steering committee were adopted. Finally, the Committee was surprised that the relevant officers of the Attorney-General's Department were not able to comment on the evaluation report in any real detail four months after it had been delivered to them.³⁰⁷

307 *Transcript*, pp. 996–1003.

Recommendation 29

The Committee recommends that the Attorney-General's Department disregard the evaluation report as incomplete and lacking in the necessary rigour.

Recommendation 30

Further, the Committee recommends that similar evaluations not be undertaken in future.

The Committee is of the opinion that scarce financial resources are better spent on academic research into the effectiveness of particular approaches to marriage and relationship education.