

Chapter 11

Advisory bodies

Under Commonwealth arrangements for family services, several organisations are funded to provide advice on family services to the Attorney-General and the Attorney-General's Department. An outline of these advisory bodies follows.

Peak bodies

Under the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) of the Attorney-General's Department, three national organisations, namely Centacare Australia Limited, Family Services Australia Limited and Relationships Australia Incorporated, are funded to provide a national voice for their members and to be actively involved in ongoing consultation with departmental program administrators on significant policy and procedural issues. These peak bodies also provide representational, training and support services for their affiliated member organisations, and participate as members of the Family Services Council. All service providers funded through the Family Relationships Services Program (FRSP) are required to join one of these peak bodies, in order to facilitate communication between the Department and the service delivery agencies.¹

Centacare Australia

Centacare Australia is the peak organisation representing the Catholic Church's diocesan-based social service agencies known as Centacare. Under the auspices of the bishop of each diocese, Centacare agencies operate autonomously but work with the national body with respect to national programs and policies.

Centacare Australia is a not for profit organisation offering an extensive range of professional family, social and employment services throughout metropolitan and rural Australia. The network of Centacare Australia employs approximately 2,000 staff operating from 150 sites.

Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a secular, non government and not for profit community based organisation. A national association, Relationships Australia consists of eight State and Territory Relationships Australia organisations. The organisation began in the late 1940s under the name of Marriage Guidance Council with counselling

1 Attorney-General's Department, *Submissions*, p. S952.

services provided mainly by volunteers. Since that time the organisation has grown to provide a range of professional services. Under the FRSP, Relationships Australia is approved to provide counselling, relationship education, family mediation and other specialist relationships programs. In 1994, the name, Relationships Australia was adopted to reflect the breadth and diversity of services offered by member organisations ²

Family Services Australia

Family Services Australia is a peak organisation which represents over half the organisations funded under the FRSP. The organisation currently has 45 ordinary funded member agencies and 14 associate non funded members. Member organisations are diverse, but include bodies associated with the Anglican, Uniting and Baptist churches and the Wesley/Central Missions. Some are associated with community legal centres, and others are independent community organisations.

Family Services Australia provides services around Australia and across all the sub-programs in the FRSP including Marriage and Relationship Education, Marriage and Relationship Counselling, Family Mediation, Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy, Family Skills Training and other specialist services.

Family Services Council

The Family Services Council was established in December 1994 to advise the Attorney-General on policy and practice for the then Family Services Program. According to the former Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney-General, Peter Duncan, the Council would:

act as a channel between the community and government aiming to ensure that family relationship services in the community serve its needs, are efficient, effective and of a high standard.³

The Attorney-General's Department sees the Family Services Council as forming a conduit between the Department and funded community-based services. The council provides advice on the development of policy directions, priorities and principles in the Family Services Program, including quality assurance and a research and evaluation agenda.

Membership of the Family Services Council comprises ten people, including a departmental representative and three peak body representatives. Other members are drawn from the broader field of service providers and the community.

2 Relationships Australia *Annual Report 1996: 2.*

3 Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney-General *Press release 4/94: 7 December 1994.*

According to its 1995-96 Annual Report, the council has provided advice on amendments to the *Family Law Act 1975*, the enactment of the *Family Law Reform Act 1995*, and the development of mediation standards to be established through the Family Law Regulations. In addition it has provided advice on the development of a proposed quality strategy for the FRSP and the involvement of children in family services. According to its most recent charter, the issues that the Council is currently advising on include: the capacity of FRSP contracted agencies to take on aspects of Family Court work; and advice on how service providers should respond to the impact of the changes to the Family Law Act.⁴

Family Law Council

The Family Law Council is a statutory authority established under section 115 of the Family Law Act. The functions of the council are to advise, and to make recommendations to, the Attorney-General concerning any matters relating to family law. Advice and recommendations to the Minister may be either at the council's own instigation or in response to a referral by the Minister. Since its inception in 1982, the council has reported and made recommendations in a wide range of areas such as *Administration of Family Law in Australia* (1985); *Arbitration in Family Law* (1988); *Child Sexual Abuse* (1988); *Representation of Children in Family Court Proceedings* (1989); *Comments on the Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Operation and Interpretation of the Family Law Act* (1993); *Patterns of Parenting After Separation* (1992); *Section 64A of the Family Law Act* (1992); and *The operation of the (UK) Children Act 1989* (1994).⁵

National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council

The National Alternative Dispute Resolution Advisory Council (NADRAC) was set up in 1995 by the then Attorney-General in order to foster the expansion of alternatives to court action in civil matters. The Government saw the establishment of NADRAC as a way of encouraging the expansion of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) as part of its strategy to lower legal costs and improve access to justice. NADRAC has provided advice on registration and accreditation requirements for mediators and the development of community education programs.⁶ While its role and function encompasses family law, it has an additional role in relation to ADR in other jurisdictions.

4 Family Services Council 1997 *Newsletter* Spring: 3.

5 Family Law Council, *Submissions*, pp. S582-S583.

6 Attorney-General *Press release* 100/95: 14 November 1995.

Assessment of the need for the peak bodies and the Family Services Council

Given such a proliferation of organisations that provide advice to the Attorney-General on family services, the Committee has sought to make an assessment of the value and functions of these organisations and whether some rationalisation might be appropriate.

Several witnesses expressed dissatisfaction with the current arrangements for peak bodies, the strongest criticism coming from Family Services Australia. This organisation believes the current funding arrangements are inequitable, and claims that it is the only true peak body representing the FRSP service providers.⁷ In Family Services Australia's view, the other two peak bodies are only national representative bodies. Centacare Australia is a body which represents a particular group of agencies provided through the Catholic Church; Relationships Australia is an umbrella body for the relationships organisations in each of the States; whereas Family Services Australia has a different character and composition.

The Committee notes that the current peak body structure was implemented by the Attorney-General's Department in 1994 following a review of the structure. Previously, there had been five peak bodies: the Australian Council of Marriage and Family Counselling Organisations (ACOMCO), Centacare Australia, Marriage Guidance Australia (now Relationships Australia), the Catholic Society for Marriage Education (CSME), and the Australian Association for Marriage Education (AAME). A 1993 discussion paper from the Department canvassed a number of alternative arrangements, notably, one national body, or alternatively, three peak bodies comprising Centacare Australia, Marriage Guidance Australia, and a new body comprising all other agencies.⁸ The latter structure was preferred by the Department and subsequently adopted. Funding was provided to three peak bodies: Centacare Australia, Marriage Guidance Australia, and a new body, Family Services Australia, which was formed by the members of ACOMCO and AAME, together with other agencies providing family services.⁹

The Committee notes that while ACOMCO has ceased to exist, AAME was restructured as the Marriage Educators Association of Australia.¹⁰ Although not funded as a peak body, CSME continues to operate as the largest national organisation of marriage and relationship education agencies in Australia.

7 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S697.

8 Attorney-General's Department (1993) 'Peak arrangements for the family services program' *Threshold* 40: 6–14.

9 (1993) 'Family Services Australia' *Threshold* 42: 3–4.

10 G Spencer (1995) 'MEAA mission statement and goals' *Threshold* 47: 12.

In its submission, Family Services Australia pointed out that the three existing peak bodies are all funded by the Commonwealth Government to the same extent (\$99,560 each per annum). It considers this to be inequitable:

The role of Family Services Australia in disseminating information, ascertaining the views of members, representing the views of members to government and other relevant bodies, informing members of government directions, ... is a far more complex task because of the diversity of member organisations and the need for extensive interaction and consultation.¹¹

Mr Clive Price, Vice President of Family Services Australia, told the Committee that the peak body's task is made more complex because it has the greatest membership of the newest sub-programs of LAFS. He said that some of their agencies are the newer agencies without the history or the support structures in place and are quite often funded under the newer programs which cannot charge fees. If an agency cannot charge fees, (which is probably appropriate because of the client population,) then its capacity to give resources to the peak body for its task becomes severely curtailed.¹²

Mr Price pointed to the value in having a range of different organisations representing the community. In his opinion there is a place for having local, small, community based organisations through to larger organisations, perhaps connected with church auspice bodies, through to the large State Relationships Australia. However, such an arrangement puts increasing strain on the peak body to try and service the needs of all these different types of agencies. He cited as an example the complexity of trying to look after a small agency in Cairns, the interests of Unifam, (which is a middle sized agency in New South Wales), and a couple of agencies in Western Australia.¹³ According to Mr Price, these difficulties are aggravated because Family Services Australia does not have the capacity to get the additional income support through levies that Centacare and Relationships Australia can get from their members.¹⁴

Mr Price also argued that in the current competitive environment where it is essential to compete for funding arrangements, Family Services Australia is at a disadvantage because it does not have the financial backing to support, resource and assist agencies to the extent that Centacare and Relationships Australia might have.¹⁵

Member organisations of Family Services Australia were also critical of the arrangements for peak bodies. Mr Andrew De'Ambrosis, Co-Director of Anglican Family Care, said that because of inadequate funding, Family Services Australia

11 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S697.

12 *Transcript*, p. 282.

13 *ibid.*

14 *ibid.*

15 *ibid.*

recently increased fees from members in order to carry out the necessary activities of a peak body. This in turn creates further difficulties for agencies such as Anglican Family Care which is already experiencing cost-cutting exercises in order to respond to no increases in funding to government programs.¹⁶

In pointing to the inequity of the present structure of peak bodies, Mr Peter Fisher, Executive Member of National Anglican Caring Organisations Network, suggested that it could be argued that if Centacare is a peak body and funded by the Attorney-General's Department, then there are good grounds for arguing that the Anglican organisation should be treated similarly. He made reference to earlier arrangements whereby in 1990 five peak organisations received funds from LAFS. In 1994, there was a perceived need to reduce this number and the strong lobby of Centacare and Relationships Australia enabled them to remain as peak bodies. All other bodies were placed together under the umbrella of Family Services Australia.¹⁷

Apart from the agencies funded through LAFS, many other organisations provide family services programs without funding from LAFS. While the peak bodies were set up specifically to look after funded agencies, Family Services Australia has also taken under its umbrella, agencies that are not yet funded or choose not to be funded. Family Services Australia acts as an information source for these organisations by providing magazines and newsletters, and holding meetings and workshops, for the exchange of information. Mr Price told the Committee that Family Services Australia believes the peak body has a role to work towards the development of standards, procedures, and quality assurance mechanisms which would assist the whole sector. However, while this role of supporting the non-funded organisations is important, Family Services Australia says the limited funding received makes it difficult to adequately perform this function.¹⁸

Ms Helen Disney, National Director of Relationships Australia, said that the current arrangements relating to peak bodies are working, but admitted that the arrangement of three peak bodies was due to historical accident rather than good planning. She said:

to be frank, if you were starting out today you perhaps would not create three.¹⁹

Ms Disney qualified this statement by saying that given the fact that there are three bodies, the funding allocated to them is being well utilised. The three bodies are working together and they are all fulfilling a really important role. She particularly praised Family Services Australia, which is in its very early days and has a big task

16 *Transcript*, p. 564.

17 *Transcript*, p. 490.

18 *Transcript*, p. 284.

19 *Transcript*, p. 667.

in establishing itself and playing an important role in representing the smaller bodies.²⁰

Some witnesses spoke positively about the current advisory structure for family services. Ms Dale Bagshaw, Chairperson of the Family Services Council, supported the current arrangements saying that given the size of the Family Services Program budget, only a very small amount is committed to consultation with the community and service providers.

In relation to the Family Services Council, Ms Bagshaw argued that as it was only established in 1994, it has provided in a short time significant advice to both the Attorney-General and LAFS on family mediation standards, the Family Law Reform Bill and family law regulation. In addition the council has prepared advice to LAFS on many aspects of its work, including proposed aims and outcomes of the FRSP.²¹

Family Services Australia saw value in having a Family Services Council in addition to peak body representation. Vice President Mr Clive Price said he thought there is a clear distinction between their roles and believes it would be very difficult to both advise the minister and lobby on the behalf of member agencies.²²

Dr Margaret Browne, First Assistant Secretary, LAFS, Attorney-General's Department, justified the existence of the Family Services Council on the basis that its membership is able to provide a broader perspective than the peak body structure can offer. Whereas the peak bodies only represent service providers, the council has a wider membership including academics and other experts in the field. Dr Browne acknowledged that there was some commonality of subject matter with the peak bodies and the Family Law Council, but she maintained that the Family Services Council is a valuable advisory body to the Department.²³ In reference to the peak body structure, Dr Browne suggested that given the way the FRSP is now structured, there would be value in having only one peak body to represent service providers, rather than the current arrangement of three.²⁴

In the evaluation of the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Sub-Program performed by ARTD in 1996, the consultants reported positively about the peak body structure suggesting that it has been very important in attaining a substantial level of cooperation between LAFS and the funded service providers.²⁵

20 *ibid.*

21 *Transcript*, p. 22.

22 *Transcript*, p. 281.

23 *Transcript*, pp. 1012–1013.

24 *Transcript*, p. 1014.

25 ARTD Management Consultants *Evaluation of the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Sub-Program: Final Report* August 1996: xii.

On the other hand, Mrs Jennifer Boland, Chairperson of the Family Law Council, suggested that there seemed to be considerable duplication and overlap between the functions of the Family Law Council and Family Services Council. She argued that duplication makes more work for those who are receiving advice and for those who are giving it.²⁶

In relation to NADRAC, Ms Boland agreed that there is also some overlap between that body and the Family Law Council, but she believes the two bodies have worked well together and that the council has had considerable input to NADRAC. She said that there is in fact a role for a distinct body to deal with alternate dispute resolution in all jurisdictions.²⁷

One suggestion put to the Committee was to establish a peak body exclusively promoting the interests of marriage education. Mr Don Burnard, Director of Family Relationships Institute, said that the three peak bodies are dominated by counselling agencies at the expense of education agencies. In stressing the importance of marriage relationship education, Mr Burnard suggested that in place of the current arrangement, there should be a peak body to exclusively look after and promote marriage and relationship education. Mr Burnard also made reference to the dissatisfaction within Family Services Australia, about the present structure of the three peak bodies.²⁸

Evidence given to the Keys Young consultants in their evaluation of the Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program also suggested that the field of marriage education suffered when it ceased to have separate representation.

When overviewing the history of marriage and relationship education in Australia, it appears that the abolition of separate peak bodies representing educators appears to have had a major impact on the recent development of the field. In particular the loss of a national trainer responsible for professional training and development was raised by many [agencies] as a major loss. Many educators not affiliated with the Catholic Society of Marriage Educators (CSME) said the loss of a national body contributed to their sense of professional isolation.²⁹

The Committee acknowledges the work done by the three peak bodies and the Family Services Council in facilitating communication between the Attorney-General's Department and family services delivery agencies. However, based on evidence to the inquiry, the Committee agrees that there are inequities and

26 *Transcript*, p. 270.

27 *ibid.*

28 *Transcript*, p. 436.

29 Keys Young (1997) *Evaluation of Marriage and Relationship Education Sub-Program: Final Report* Sydney: 43.

anomalies in the current advisory structure and that there appears to be duplication of responsibilities between the three peak bodies, the Family Services Council, the Family Law Council and NADRAC.

Evidence to this inquiry and to the Keys Young evaluation suggests that there have been difficulties sustaining the professional development of marriage educators and family skills educators. The Committee believes that the current structure of three peak bodies contributes to these difficulties by setting up inappropriate boundaries and rivalries between service providers. These rivalries work against the sharing of resources and the professional development of marriage educators.

The Committee strongly supports the need to encourage marriage educators to research and develop standards for their profession. The Committee believes that a peak body should play a greater role in this important area. For this reason, it sees advantages in abolishing the current peak body structure which has accentuated and aggravated rivalries between organisations rather than encouraging co-operation between them. The Committee believes that peak bodies should not be comprised of service providers which constitute an exclusive network of agencies as exists currently.

Recommendation 48

The Committee recommends that the current structure be replaced with two peak bodies to represent the two distinctive types of services offered within the Family Relationships Services Program.

One peak body would be set up and funded to represent the interests of intervention programs such as marriage counselling and mediation and the other peak body would be funded to represent prevention programs such as marriage and relationships education and family skills education.

The Committee believes that a structure built around these two distinct activities would enable greater professional development and encourage a sharing of resources amongst similar service providers. Membership of these two peak bodies would be open to individual educators, therapists, counsellors or mediators who are recognised by the appropriate professional bodies. Office holders of the executive bodies within these two peak councils would be elected by individual members and not by service providers or Government. However, in order to provide a smooth transition to the new arrangements, the Committee suggests that during the first 12 months of operation, the FRSP should ensure that current representative groups are appropriately represented on these two bodies.

The Committee considered whether the existing structure should be replaced by one national peak body, either operating alone, or in conjunction with the Family Services Council. The Committee is of the opinion that a clear emphasis on preventive programs of education should be reflected in policy and administrative

arrangements. The Committee believes, partly as a consequence of the historical development of the field, that the major emphasis remains with the therapeutic counselling and mediation services. This would be likely to remain the case if one peak body was formed, unless there were clear requirements for adequate balance between prevention, and counselling and therapy. The Committee has no confidence in prevention being given an appropriate emphasis under one peak body. Accordingly, the Committee recommends that two peak bodies be established.

The Committee believes there is considerable duplication in the work of the Family Services Council, the Family Law Council and NADRAC. It notes that much of the advice provided by the Family Services Council in 1995–96 and the charter for 1997–98 relate to family law and mediation standards. The Committee believes the Family Law Council and NADRAC already have responsibilities in these areas and questions the need for another body to duplicate this work.

Recommendation 49

The Committee recommends that the Family Services Council be abolished and its advisory functions be appropriately distributed between the new councils, the Family Law Council and NADRAC. The funding currently allocated to the Family Services Council (approximately \$150,000 per annum) should be re-directed to the peak body structure to provide further support and professional development for educators, counsellors, therapists and mediators.

The Committee notes that currently the Commonwealth Government expends approximately \$100,000 on annual grants to each of the three peak bodies, and an estimated \$150,000 on the operation of the Family Services Council, a total of some \$450,000. The peak bodies have submitted that additional funds would be of use to them.

Recommendation 50

The Committee recommends that an annual grant, in the order of \$200,000, be made available to each of the two new councils, the Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council, and the Counselling and Mediation Council to undertake their roles.

The Committee believes that by comprising practitioners from the respective fields, the councils will enjoy the experience of both individual practitioners and the agencies in which they work. The councils will also enable an effective voice for practitioners from fields such as family skills that currently have no direct representation. The Committee expects that existing bodies such as Relationships Australia and Centacare Australia will continue to exist as umbrella bodies for particular groups of agencies. These bodies represent agencies affiliated to each other in a particular way. They do not represent the field generally. Their role as peak bodies has the effect of artificially dividing the field. The Committee is of the opinion that such bodies should not hold the status of peak bodies for the purposes

of the FRSP. The Committee notes that the funding of the existing peak bodies is subject to renegotiation in the 1998-99 financial year.

Recommendation 51

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

It further recommends that the funding be provided to the new councils for an initial period of five years.

The Committee believes that the Attorney-General's Department should provide more support for unfunded agencies working in family services. It agrees with Family Services Australia's submission that a peak body should play a role in working towards the development of standards, procedures and quality assurance mechanisms which would assist the whole sector.

Recommendation 52

The Committee recommends that the new councils take an active role in providing support services for educators and therapists working in non-funded agencies in the field.

In making the recommendations to change the peak structure, the Committee wishes to acknowledge the work undertaken by the existing bodies, Centacare Australia, Family Services Australia, and Relationships Australia. The Committee notes that the constituent agencies of these national bodies provide high quality services to Australian people across the FRSP. It also acknowledges the valuable work they have undertaken in developing the field of family relationships. However, the Committee is of the opinion that the current peak body structure is inappropriate and in need of change.

Australian Institute of Family Studies

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (the AIFS) was established in February 1980 under Part XIVA of the Family Law Act. Its statutory functions are to promote, by the conduct and encouragement of research, identification and development into the understanding of the factors affecting family and marital stability in Australia. The object of the AIFS is to promote the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society. In addition, the AIFS has the statutory responsibility to advise and assist the responsible Minister in relation to the making of grants and to supervise the employment of such grants.³⁰

At its establishment, the AIFS operated within the Attorney-General's portfolio. It is now located within the Department of Health and Family Services and reports to the Minister for Family Services.

30 Australian Institute of Family Studies *Annual Report 1996–1997*: 8.

The AIFS in its 1996-97 Annual Report, has identified six core areas of research concentration for the next three year period. These are: family well being across the life course; family formation, dissolution and reformation; parenting and young children; ageing, later life families and family care; child protection studies; and studies on living standards of Australian families.

The Committee questioned witnesses about the role of the AIFS in fostering research into marriage and family life.

Dr Moira Eastman, of the Australian Catholic University in East Melbourne, argued that Australian and US research has progressively ignored or neglected marriage and family life in their discussions and in their research activities. She pointed specifically to the AIFS and suggested that it has not paid sufficient attention to research into the positive contributions that families make and the importance of marriage within the family, but rather has concentrated on the other end of the spectrum where families and marriages have become dysfunctional. Dr Eastman cited the example of a 1993 AIFS conference, where only two papers out of approximately two hundred were given on marriage: 'To me that is not the right balance. I believe that the positive aspects of marriage have not been recognised.'³¹

Dr Eastman suggested that an institute of women's studies would have as its key focus research into women and by analogy marriage and family should therefore be one of the key focuses of the AIFS.

Dr Eastman also referred to the anomaly in the fact that Australian universities do not have a chair of marital studies nor faculties offering marriage or family studies, and yet marriage has a major impact on the economy.

Dr Eastman made several recommendations which in her view would help and encourage research into families and marriage.

Firstly she suggested that the absence of marriage research was partly attributable to poor funding and therefore it is important that the Australian Research Council actually establishes a category specially set aside for marriage and family research.

Secondly, she suggested that greater effort should be made to feed important data relating to marriage and family into the National Health Strategy. She believes the AIFS has a responsibility to promote this data and put it into the minds of other government departments. She also noted that the AIFS had failed to give evidence to the 1993 National Health Strategy *Pathways to Better Health*.

Dr Eastman stated that 85 per cent of care of children under five years of age is done entirely by families. She therefore argued that it is important that families with

31 *Transcript*, p. 392.

children under five years of age be better represented on the board of the AIFS so that they can get their concerns onto the research agenda.³²

Ms Susan Gribben, Executive Director of Relationships Australia (Victoria), said she believes that the focus of research in Australia has been more on children and families rather than on couples and maintaining relationships. Like Dr Eastman, she believes the AIFS should take a larger role in relationship research.³³

On the other hand, Dr Harry McGurk and Mrs Ilene Wolcott from the AIFS defended its work saying there are sound reasons for the lack of longitudinal research into the effectiveness of marriage education programs in Australia. Mrs Wolcott suggested that the lack of research is partly due to the limited nature of such programs. Because the strength of marriage education has been through the church movement and has focussed on pre-marriage education, Mrs Wolcott believes that this has probably limited the ability to extend research to the more general community. Because of the reasonably captive audiences that tend to go to marriage education, the result may be that you will skew the kinds of people that come and their reasons for coming, even though clearly it has had a positive outcome.³⁴

Dr McGurk added that while it has been possible to evaluate the short term outcomes of pre-marital education, it is very expensive to carry out longitudinal research. He made reference to current research undertaken by the AIFS into a large scale life course which will follow 2,000 families over a very long period of time and which will enable studies of the longer term impact of marital preparation courses. However, as Mrs Wolcott said, such research is inherently difficult because there are numerous intervening variables that would come in between the period of pre-marriage education and the period under examination. So many factors have occurred in a couple's life that it is very difficult to track back whether or not what was learned or what was absorbed in the pre-marital education program actually was the causal factor of what occurs later.³⁵

In response to criticisms that the ARC does not support research into families, the ARC argues that family welfare research is encompassed under the broad areas of social sciences and the humanities and applications for research grants are assessed in ARC grant rounds accordingly. The ARC defended its position by citing examples of recently funded projects to show that its research funding programs have supported and continue to support research in the area of family welfare.³⁶ The Council pointed out that applications for funding support must compete with other

32 *ibid.* 394.

33 *Transcript*, p. 197.

34 *Transcript*, p. 251.

35 *Transcript*, p. 252.

36 For example, in 1996, the ARC allocated approximately \$210,000 to seven research programs in areas such as parenting and marriage relationships; conflict and violence in marriages; the changing role of women and its effects on marriage; and the re-definition of marriage.

research applications across all research fields on the criterion of research excellence and that competition for funding through the Council's programs is extremely strong.

The Committee acknowledges the concerns raised by witnesses about the neglect of research into marriage and family in Australia. The Committee agrees with Dr Eastman that this area of study needs to receive a higher profile within Australian research institutions and it believes that the ARC could play a more active role promoting this.

Recommendation 53

The Committee recommends that the Australian Research Council assist in raising the profile of family and relationships studies by having a research sub-category pertaining to the study of marriage and family within the more general category of the social sciences.

The Committee's views on the role of the AIFS

The Committee believes that the AIFS is a valuable research institute that should be preserved. The Committee notes that the AIFS, since its establishment in 1980, has had a statutory responsibility to promote and encourage research into the understanding of factors affecting family and marital stability in Australia and more generally to promote the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society.³⁷ The Committee believes that the AIFS should be encouraged to focus more closely on this original charter.

In 1992, an External Panel of Review was appointed by the then Minister of Social Security to conduct a review of the AIFS. In its report, the panel said that the key task of the AIFS is to ensure that the AIFS remains at the forefront of family research. To that end the panel recommended:

- (i) AIFS should provide a forum for family research – to allow analyses and opinions contrary to AIFS policy suggestions to be aired prominently (and not necessarily separately from AIFS research);
- (ii) AIFS should move towards the discussion of options for family policy in a wide variety of areas;
- (iii) greater emphasis should be placed on the submission of articles for publication in refereed journals and
- (iv) AIFS should extend its links with other institutions (especially Universities and other interested parties).³⁸

37 Australian Institute of Family Studies *Annual Report 1996-1997*: 8.

38 External Panel of Review *An Evaluation of the Australian Institute of Family Studies: Final Report of the External Panel of Review* Canberra: 1993: 1.

While some of these issues have been addressed³⁹, the Committee believes that the AIFS should be more proactive in addressing the panel's fourth recommendation, namely that the AIFS establish more links with other research organisations, particularly universities.

At its establishment, the AIFS operated within the Attorney-General's portfolio. It is now located within the Department of Health and Family Services and reports to the Minister for Family Services. The Committee notes that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare also reports to the Health and Family Services minutes. The Committee believes that in order to promote research into marriage and family, it would be advantageous for the AIFS to be co-located with FRSP which would mean relocated with the Attorney-General's Department. Within that portfolio, the AIFS could maintain closer links with other organisations involved in family relationships services and concentrate its resources in areas more closely related to its original charter.

Recommendation 54

The Committee recommends that the Australian Institute of Family Studies be relocated within the Attorney-General's Department to enable it to focus more closely on the terms of its original charter as set out in Part XIVA of the *Family Law Act 1975*.

The Committee believes that the AIFS and the proposed new peak bodies have a pivotal role in developing and maintaining the momentum of research in the field of marriage and family relationships. Given the work that the Committee has already done in this area, the Committee believes it could play a useful role in monitoring further progress and developments. For this reason, the Committee believes it would be mutually beneficial if representatives from these three key organisations meet annually with the Committee to report on their activities and progress.

Recommendation 55

The Committee recommends that the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the proposed Marriage Relationships and Parenting Council and the proposed Counselling and Mediation Council be required to report annually on their activities to this Committee.

39 For example, the Committee notes that the AIFS journal, *Family Matters*, does include material from sources outside the AIFS.

Kevin Andrews MP
Chairman

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