

Editorial: *What works in practice?*

MARG LYNN

This issue is special. Its centerpiece is dedicated to honouring the life and work of Ian Murray who died on July 12th, 2011. We published Jan Richardson's moving tribute to him in the last issue of *Practice Reflexions* Vol 6. No 1, 2011. It was Ian who made *Practice Reflexions* possible by bringing together the (now) Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA) and Monash University (now) Community Welfare and Counselling staff, (we are all resignified now!), and developing the synergies to produce an important voice for the profession.

Ian was known to ACWA members and colleagues as a career-long advocate for the recognition of community service workers (by whatever title), those practitioners whose skills are often seen as second best to and by social workers and psychologists. It came as no surprise to us to discover that his last work, his magnum opus, was the creation of a very substantially researched argument to support his contention that the range of community service workers achieve as effective counseling outcomes as their more lengthily trained professional colleagues such as social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists. He takes this argument out of the realm of community service practitioners' frustrated conversations about inequity of recognition and reward to challenge a powerful discourse through rigorous research.

We publish here Ian's paper in full, with only some 'tidying up'. It is clearly different from the usual refereed paper in that its author was not able to respond to his critics and further develop the paper. We invited a number of writers to provide comment, and we are pleased to publish two responses, one a refereed paper from Sue Burney, Jo Brooker and Jane Fletcher, and the other a personal reflection from Margaret O'Brien (formerly MacMahon), who worked as an AIWCW (ACWA) colleague of Ian's and knew his advocacy well. We invite others who would like to formulate a response to Ian's paper, as either a refereed contribution, a note or a personal reflection, to write for the next issue of *Practice Reflexions*.

Sue Burney, Jo Brooker and Jane Fletcher respectfully challenge some of Ian's methodology, arguing that he concentrates on the many academic papers that support his argument rather than reviewing the whole field to reveal counter arguments, and further, that many of the studies need to make use of matched control groups to establish that 'apples are being compared with apples'. But the reader will be enlightened to find, nevertheless, the extent of research support for Ian's arguments, and the complexity of the search for evidence when much of the research is silent on

such matters as length of training. The authors agree with Ian that length of training is not demonstrated to necessarily correlate with better client outcomes, though they identify methodological limitations in Ian's argument that do not sustain evidence of better outcomes being achieved by lesser trained practitioners. They do support his claim that the therapeutic alliance may account for significant outcomes with clients, and that an effective alliance does not depend on length of training. Ultimately the authors make a fine contribution in naming areas where further systematic research is needed to validate Ian's claims; they do not ever suggest that such evidence may not be found. Their own, un-researched, practice experience supports many of Ian's contentions.

Margaret O'Brien writes from a background of deep practice and teaching experience, sound practice wisdom, and engagement with and observation of learners in the field. Her evidence is less scientific and more practical and conceptual. She reflects the title of one of the research texts that Ian draws on: Duncan and Miller's (1999) *The Heart and Soul of Change: What Works in Therapy*. 'What works' is at the heart of all good practice, and community welfare workers integrate their knowledge, values and skills to achieve the most successful and workable outcomes they can. What Ian was setting out to achieve was a bridge between the practice wisdom and localised research of most practitioners, and the rigorous knowledge that is created by scientific knowledge seekers. Such research needs to be informed by the parameters of practice, unblinkered by professional status categories and open to discovering some 'inconvenient truths' (for some) that lesser trained professionals are not only as effective, but perhaps even more effective in achieving successful outcomes with their clients, than their more lengthily trained colleagues. In attempting to build this bridge, Ian is to be judged by the knowledge frameworks on both sides of it. Burney, Brooker and Fletcher have sharpened the tools required to complete the bridge and have it standing firmly on both sides, recognised as sturdy, safe and open to two-way exchange. The implications of Ian's findings are profound if established, and even more importantly, if accepted by those with responsibility for acting on them: mental health professional bodies, universities, governments, non-government funding bodies, researchers and ultimately, practitioners and clients.

Two more papers are published in this issue that take us into the fields of community development and mental health. Wendy Mackenzie demonstrates a keen interest in democratic and civic principles, and the risk to their integrity that managerialism poses. She argues for local government to encourage the empowerment of its citizens through the adoption of participatory democracy, requiring education and changed practices, and a willingness to relinquish the neoliberal marketplace paradigm when dealing with their communities, especially in relation to the management and creative use of community halls.

Samuel Crinall provides very valuable insights for those working in the field of disability, where negative behaviours of clients have been reinforced through attention, in the absence of more functional behaviours having been learnt by clients or staff. The Ermha program could probably trace its genealogy to the individual psychologists Adler and Dreikurs, strong influences on parent education training, who saw that undue attention seeking was a 'mistaken goal' and could be addressed by establishing equality and cooperation, learnt through coming to understand logical or natural consequences of their behavior, within warm relationships. Applying this approach to challenging clients such as Ermha's has clearly been extremely effective and deserves to be known widely.

Some interesting papers are already waiting in the wings for publication next year, and it is our intention to pre-publish during the year, with a consolidated, editorialised issue at the end of the year. Look out for great papers to read in 2013, and please consider writing for us too, either responding to Ian Murray's paper, or on a topic of your passion, interest or concern. You will notice that the table of contents is identifying the state of origin of our writers. We would be very pleased for future issues to further demonstrate the national breadth of our contributors.

Dr Margaret Lynn is an adjunct senior research fellow in the School of Applied Media and Social Sciences, Monash University Gippsland, marg.lynn@monash.edu or marglynn@tpg.com.au