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Brotherhood Comment

August 2000

BROTHERHOOD of St LAURENCE

Helping people build better lives

A regular update on our research, analysis and public advocacy

Substance abuse and poverty

An extract from the Brotherhood's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Substance Abuse.

In some Brotherhood services supporting people with particularly high needs, staff estimate between 60 to 100 per cent of their clients are directly affected by substance abuse[1]. Some are addicts or heavy users, past heavy users with related injuries, engaged in the supply of illicit substances or children of heavy users. Service users often live in areas associated with substance abuse and this has an impact on their lives and on any attempt at community development.

Many people who work in and use Brotherhood services express alarm about what they see as a widespread increase in the problematic overuse of substances within the communities they serve. They perceive this distressing level of substance abuse to be partially a consequence of the hopelessness associated with poverty and long-term unemployment.

Growing apart, a Brotherhood report that explored Australians' attitudes towards and understandings of poverty (Johnson & Taylor 2000), identified a community-held suspicion of a link between substance abuse and poverty. They reported that drug taking, along with street crime and begging, were seen by many Australians to be examples of the more visible aspects of poverty. While full employment was viewed as the key to eliminating poverty, the report posits that an increased fear and mistrust of the poor may be a consequence of the connections made between poverty, drugs, violence and crime.

The relationships between inadequate employment opportunities, high rates of unemployment, poverty and substance abuse are not just one way. While a person's substance abuse is readily seen to act as a barrier to employment, it is equally important to see how the hopelessness and frustration experienced with long-term unemployment and its related poverty can trigger heavy drug use.

In this context, the current Federal Government's 'tough on drugs' stance, with its focus on penalising those participating in the supply of illicit drugs, often results in low-income drug users doing it tough.

Messages that people, especially injecting drug users, stop their illicit drug use are of little value while assistance to do so is inadequate and services are difficult to access. In addition, many services require payment, which puts them out of the reach of people living on low incomes. If this current policy were considered within the context of mutual obligation, it would appear that the Federal Government has some responsibility to improve access to specialist services for drug-dependent people, in response to demand.

'Tough on drugs' fails to address the reasons underlying the demand and also the incentives to supply illicit drugs. While substance abuse acts as a barrier to employment in the mainstream economy, the easy access to income-producing opportunities in the black market of illicit drugs needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

It is a tragedy that so many individuals and families living in poverty are touched by the harm associated with substance abuse. Most people recognise that poverty is caused by the lack of opportunity and insufficient income and they want adequate responses to poverty and to substance abuse. The Federal Government's focus on control and punishment around both substance abuse and income support reinforces unhelpful stereotypes of people living on low incomes.

The importance of improving employment opportunities and social supports and providing a variety of positive alternatives to the overuse of legal and illegal drugs by those most at risk cannot be overstated.

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Reference

Johnson, J & Taylor, J 2000, *Growing apart: a new look at poverty in Australia*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne.

Contents

[1] In this context, substance abuse refers to the habitual and heavy use of addictive, mood-altering drugs, including alcohol, that result in substantial damage to a person, their life chances and their relationships with family, friends, victims of drug-related crime and other members of the community.

In this issue . . .

The Brotherhood has rarely contributed to the debate around drug use, knowing that there are others more qualified to do so. But evidence from staff of Brotherhood services about the impacts of substance abuse on people and communities we serve prompted the organisation to put forward what it sees and knows. Sally Jope summarises the Brotherhood submission to the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Substance Abuse.

The Brotherhood is appreciative of many aspects of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform's blue discussion paper. However, we see significant gaps, problems and failings within it. Don Siemon addresses the feasibility of 'welfare to work' and integrated payments, and enters the 'incentives versus coercion' debate. The Reference Group's (and the Federal Government's) failure to address the fundamental issue of poverty is disappointing and we will continue to work on raising awareness in this area.

Two forthcoming reports take a particular look at the City of Yarra. Sally Jope reports on rooming house trends, noting a concerning decline in availability, while Nora Fernandes of the Ecumenical Migration Centre uses the Atherton Gardens Housing Estate as a case study to consider the disadvantage experienced by many public housing tenants, especially recent immigrants with poor English skills.

An article on the impacts of poverty on children is extracted from the Brotherhood's new report, *'No child. . . ' Child poverty in Australia*. Unfortunately little progress has been made on tackling child poverty over the past decade.

You will have noticed *Brotherhood Comment's* 'new look'. Your comments can be included in the feedback survey on Social Action and Research enclosed with this issue. Your opinions on the value and effectiveness of our work are important to us and are incorporated into our planning processes.

Recent submissions

Significant submissions or statements released by the Brotherhood over 1999–2000 include:

Legislation for a new tax system (Senate Select Committee and Reference Committee on Community Affairs)

Comments on the discussion paper, Targeting dental services: people with special needs (Victorian Department of Human Services)

A new tax system (Family Assistance) bills (Senate Legislation Committee on Community Affairs)

Issues specific to older workers seeking employment (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations)

Changes in Victorian schools and implications for lower-income families (People Together inquiry into Public Education)

Inquiry into the Workplace Relations Legislation Amendment (More Jobs, Better Pay) Bill (Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Legislation Committee)

A safety net that helps build fulfilling lives (Reference Group on Welfare Reform)

A safety net that allows sole parent families to build fulfilling lives (Reference Group on Welfare Reform)

Interim report of the Reference Group: Brotherhood of St Laurence response (Reference Group on Welfare Reform)

Parliamentary Inquiry into Substance Abuse (Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs)

Public education—the next generation (Contribution to review of public education in Victoria)

All these submissions are available for the cost of copying and mailing, usually $9. Please contact the Brotherhood Library and Information Service on (03) 9483 1388, e-mail: library@bsl.org.au.

BROTHERHOOD of St LAURENCE

Helping people build better lives

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Brotherhood Comment is published three times a year by the Social Action and Research Division of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.
The Brotherhood of St Laurence works for the well-being of Australians on low incomes to improve their economic, social and personal circumstances. It does this through direct aid and support, and by providing a wide range of services and activities for families, the unemployed and the aged.
The Brotherhood also researches the causes of poverty, undertakes community education and lobbies government for a better deal for people on low incomes.

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Narrowing support

A case study of immigration and public housing

The Ecumenical Migration Centre's recent study of a public housing estate in the City of Yarra raises an important question for program planners and community service providers: can disadvantage among public housing tenants be adequately addressed without action to review social policy and community structures?

Unfair policies to begin with

Shaping services to community needs: a case study of Atherton Gardens Housing Estate, Fitzroy is a new research report of a public housing estate, addressing the needs of residents, how community agencies in the area meet these needs and an analysis of current residents' issues in relation to changing public policy on housing, immigration, welfare and estate management.

In the past decade, migrants faced more disadvantage as compared to earlier arrivals. For example, the state provided hostel accommodation with integrated health, social and educational services to all immigrants (mostly from Eastern Europe, Chile and Lebanon) from the 1950s to 1970s. By 1993, this on-arrival accommodation was provided to 563 of 2,505 refugee and humanitarian entrants only and a shift had been made towards reliance on family and community support and Community Refugee Settlement Scheme grants. Most refugees were pushed into private rental housing to wait their turn for public housing.

By the late 1980s, housing costs rose and this made home ownership difficult if not impossible for a group that had few resources to begin with and less over the years, given the high cost of living in Australia compared to their countries of origin. In 1993 the Victorian Government commenced severe funding cuts to welfare, education, health and recreation budgets.

Atherton Gardens housing estate

Innovative approaches

The Tenants' League of the 1930s was exceptional in the mass movement it spurred and the action taken to address larger issues. EMC's work with migrant groups in the 1960s expanded to take up migrants' rights with Indo-Chinese, Timorese, Turks and Yugoslavians who moved to the inner-city area in the 1970s.

As these groups became more organised, other organisations such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence became actively involved with local government, coalitions and umbrella groups to address larger issues of rights to services and state policy. The Brotherhood's Family Centre developed an innovative approach to poverty during this time, in that it addressed economic and social needs of families living on low incomes. By the 1980s, welfare and development agencies began to play less visionary and proactive roles in influencing state policy.

Today, under-resourced agencies in Fitzroy are preoccupied with material assistance, parenting/child-oriented programs, tutoring programs, tenants advice and assistance, small-scale social and recreational activities for City of Yarra's disadvantaged. Few, if any, of these address state responsibility to put back in place the support services available to disadvantaged groups before 1993.

Narrowing support

Removed from managing its own residential facilities when all tenants' associations in 1997 were defunded, the Atherton Gardens Residents' Association lacks the power and finance to reconnect with the culturally diverse residents on the estate in meaningful ways to improve living conditions. With 64 per cent of residents living on less than $200 a week, and half of the 75 per cent overseas born unable to speak English fluently (City of Yarra 1998), the Atherton Gardens estate also represents the debilitating outcome of a decade of cuts in social spending on education, health and welfare.

The research suggests that issues such as inter-generational poverty on the estate, lack of language-specific workers, weak resident associations, poor estate security and support services must be addressed at the policy level by the state as part of a long-term strategy to tackle disadvantage.

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City of Yarra 1998, *High rise estate resident profiles*, City of Yarra, Melbourne.

The four pillars of welfare reform

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform, appointed by Senator Jocelyn Newman to canvass new directions for the social security system, has reported to the Government. Their final report is yet to be made public, but their blue discussion paper has been widely distributed and debated amongst employment, disability and consumer organisations. ***Don Siemon*** *questions four major themes which are embedded in, but not always overtly addressed by, the Reference Group's report.*

The Commonwealth Government's efforts to 'modernise' the social security system began with a focus on 'welfare dependency' (Newman 1999), echoing overseas slogans such as 'welfare to work' and suggesting that the income security system is itself an impediment to recipients moving into the labour force and becoming independent of 'welfare'.

The Reference Group on Welfare Reform (2000) report, by contrast, sought to build discussion around the more positive notion of supports for 'participation'—both economic participation (specifically work, education and training) and social participation (including caring responsibilities and other less specific engagements with other people).

ACOSS (2000) has accurately identified the problems and unresolved questions within the Blue Paper. But behind the details of the Reference Group's suggestions are a number of broader issues on which the Government needs to listen to the experience of human services providers.

Is 'welfare to work' a possible dream?

For some time social security policy has sought to expand the chances of unemployed people, sole parents and people with serious disabilities being more active in the labour market.

But while the idea of encouraging people to move into paid work is easily accepted, we need to be very clear on exactly what problem we are trying to solve through further reform and how much can be done by changes to income security to move people into work.

For example, there seems to be some concern that people receiving Disability Support Pension (DSP) should be encouraged to work more, since numbers on this payment have been growing quickly. The growth does not seem to be driven by looser qualifying criteria; indeed, there has been little if any agreement as to the causes of the rise in numbers of people on DSP.

And even if it is possible that some of the people receiving DSP might have been working had they not lost their job due to changes in manufacturing, for example, does that mean that they are now sheltering from employment? Or is it that prolonged unemployment has compounded a disability? Or that there are simply not the jobs there for them? And how irreversible is their retirement?

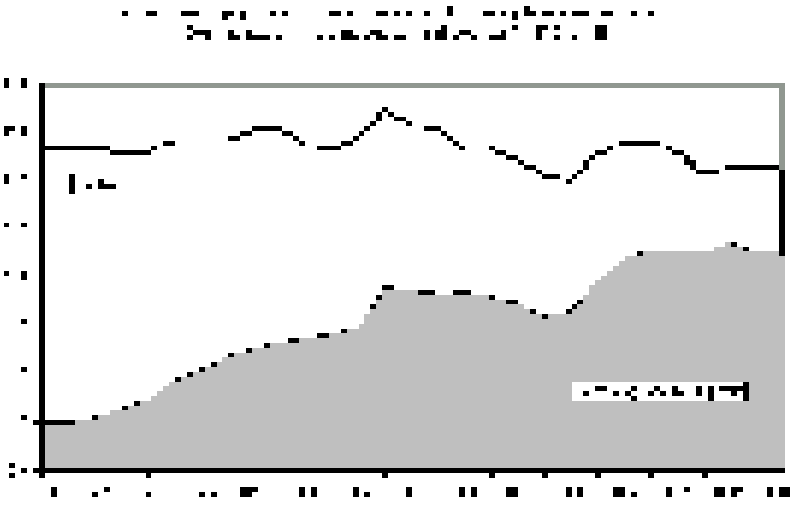
More broadly, we have to ask whether rising levels of social security recipiency are a cause or an effect of lack of work. A graph of joblessness produced for the Reference Group (Figure 1) is quite striking. It shows that:

- the proportion of 'work force age' Australians who were jobless has been fairly stable—if anything falling slightly; while
- the proportion of the jobless who were on social security payments has been rising over time.

The change in this graph in part reflects a shift in 'dependency' from the family to the state—something which has been happening in various ways for a long period, is probably irreversible and has been mostly very beneficial.

But the graph also suggests that the rising 'welfare dependence' is not a result of people being unwilling to work—that is, the welfare system creating joblessness—but reflects the changing composition of joblessness, a selection effect. In a period when more people are physically able to work compared with the number of full-time jobs, those who are less attractive to employers (with lower skills, little experience or long-term unemployment) or who find it hardest to get work which is possible to sustain, given their personal situation (for example, sole responsibility for children, or

Figure 1
Reproduced courtesy of Peter Dawkins, Melbourne Institute



disability), are most likely to receive social security.

This echoes US research on 'capability poverty' (Haveman & Bershadker 1998) which suggests that it has become harder for people in the USA to move out of poverty through work, 'even if they were to fully use their capabilities, their human capital' (p.28).

It also suggests that efforts to make welfare recipients increase their skills or jobsearch effort will, by themselves, have little impact on total levels of dependency.

Positive incentives are important—but how much, and why?

One explanation for rising levels of social security recipiency is that taking up paid work is less financially rewarding. High effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) arise from the income tests on unemployment allowances—payments are reduced by up to 70 cents for every dollar earned—compounded by the income tax levied by employers on the earnings. The resultant lack of reward for working was part of the justification made for reductions in income tax rates and, more importantly, the eased income test in the Family Tax Benefit introduced as part of the new tax package.

However, lower EMTRs are not always a good goal in themselves (see Bradbury 1999). Apart from anything else, easing high EMTRs at one point in the income distribution tends to raise them elsewhere. The result is that any increase in employment among one group of workers may be offset by reduced labour supply amongst others.

But even if the aggregate labour supply effects of lowering EMTRs are probably modest, it remains important to provide some positive work incentives for social security recipients:

- these incentives recognise the value of people's own efforts to support themselves and lift their standard of living;
- they reduce the risk of poverty traps (that is, of people not being able to lift their incomes through work to a decent living standard); and
- they reduce the risk that people will direct their efforts into the cash economy.

There are lots we can do to these ends which is helpful, even if our efforts are less ambitious than either major reductions in withdrawal rates or tax credits (as proposed by the Opposition).

There is much to be said for the aim of removing the very high EMTR 'spikes', where net returns from additional work become very small or even negative. Even though these very high rates are often over a narrow income range, sometimes they are quite noticeable and depress the average returns in crucial bands. For example, there has been a significant problem of this sort for lower-paid mothers with young children (Tasker & Siemon 1998, pp.31–32).

The idea of an expanded 'earnings bank' which allows for more equal treatment of earnings from episodic high levels of work and more consistent low levels of work is certainly worth pursuing.

Improving child care affordability is extremely important for sole parents, particularly those studying or training. The new Child Care Benefit is of some help here, but far from enough (Siemon 2000a).

Finally, the tax changes put in place this July purport to have markedly improved returns from work for many households. Before spending too much on tinkering further, we need to examine the impact of this, particularly on sole parent households. The reduction of the withdrawal rate on Parenting Payment from 50 to 40 per cent and the lowering of the withdrawal rate on Family Tax Benefit from 50 to 30 per cent should have markedly improved work incentives. Yet inspection of the cameos contained in the original tax reform proposals (Costello 1998, pp.179–180), suggests that for some sole parents, at least, returns from part-time work may actually be decreased.

Do we need more coercion?

There is much more that we could be considering by way of positive assistance to jobless Australians to make decently-paid work more possible, not just through incentives but through improved employment assistance and provision of education and training opportunities.

- We should avoid simple notions that 'work is good'. Or equally 'work is the best route out of poverty'. (As opposed to what?)
- One of the striking problems the Brotherhood has seen is that some people are trying all sorts of work but are unable to get a secure job which really moves them away from poverty.
- And we shouldn't forget that Australia has reduced poverty—particularly the depth of poverty—over the past 20 years precisely through better social security payments.
- We need to be clear that most of the ills of 'welfare dependency' are more accurately ascribed to poverty and unemployment.

Given these positive possibilities, and the extent to which sanctions are already being used, particularly on young unemployed people, what are we to make of the hints within the Blue Paper that unemployed people, sole parents or disability pensioners might be directed far more than now, under some further extension of 'Mutual Obligation'?

As a society, we can easily slip into an easy assumption that coercion or higher demands on recipients is inherently 'good for them'. Some cautions are in order. We should remember that work

testing in the social security system arose primarily as a way of checking entitlement. It is a way in which people prove that they are really unemployed (needing and looking for full-time work). Tighter testing is a way of narrowing the group who are entitled to payment—or at best a device to reassure an anxious public about who is truly needy.

By contrast there does not seem to be much evidence that tougher work testing is in itself a good way of helping people get jobs. It may drive people into the illegal or cash economy, for example. In assessing 'Mutual Obligation', we need to be able to pull apart what might be useful and what might not—and what might be better alternatives. As with 'Work for the Dole', the issue is not whether it produces any 'outcomes', but the most desirable way of getting the best outcomes.

From this viewpoint, the US experience of 'welfare to work' needs to be very carefully assessed before we accept claims that higher levels of paternalism, direction and coercion have been successful. The outcomes may have far more to do with opportunities rather than compulsion.

There is, and has been, a degree of paternalism in the administration of the social security system. The community probably supports this because it believes that there are people—particularly young people—who will benefit by direction. But if we are to guard against slipping into bureaucratic bullying, we need to be clear when and how we can justify coercion, to justify directing people to do something against their wishes, against their perception of their own interest.

If coercion is justified, governments and service providers really need to be able to offer people something more than a vague statistical benefit. If we want to sleep at night, we can only insist that people pursue activities if we can point to a tangible and proportionate benefit for that individual.

Non-government welfare organisations have learnt the hard way that individual choice and consumer rights need more protection, not less. It is what we have spent three decades striving to put in place. It is supported by all governments and reinforced by quality of care standards, complaints commissioners and guardianship boards. It is just as important in social security, which is why we have legal remedies in place.

More practically, we also know that coercion comes at a price.

It can reinforce distrust of those Centrelink or Job Network staff who claim to be helping jobseekers. It can set up barriers rather than break them down. People may be less likely to seek assistance because they distrust the system and fear sanctions.

Because coercion usually privileges administrative simplicity over individual choices and rights, it can lead to people getting pushed in wrong directions. Putting a graduate chemist to work painting a hall is hardly likely to improve their career prospects. It is more likely to distract them from competing for the jobs for which they are trained.

Would integrating payments help?

The dominant bureaucratic agenda advanced by the Blue Paper is that of integrating a series of 'workforce age' payments into one. Just as the Youth Allowance was created by combining Austudy, youth unemployment and sickness payments into one, so a single payment could be built from adult unemployment and sickness allowances, Parenting Payment and DSP.

Before we conclude that this is an idea whose time has come, we should be aware of some possible risks.

The reasons for some people being on pensions (DSP and Parenting Payment) were not trivial. It was because it was very clear that it was unreasonable to expect these people to be fully engaged in supporting themselves. This thinking lies behind lower withdrawal rates for pensions, for example: people are expected to have to depend upon them for significant periods of time and were unlikely to be able to work full-time. Circumstances and expectations have changed somewhat over the past 20 years, but we need to be clear how far they have changed. Otherwise treating all these three groups as minor variants of 'unemployed' may disguise reality.

The vast majority of people aspire to build a higher living standard than that offered by social security.

Indeed, in the current context, simplification among these payments alone runs the risk of exacerbating the emerging division of the social security system (between age pensions, family tax benefits and 'welfare' payments), and could lead to lower standards of living for sole parents and people with serious disabilities.

The reasons for pursuing simplification, moreover, do not seem as urgent as with the Youth Allowance. There, the main issue was to allow young people to combine work and study without falling between gaps in the two payment systems and to reduce as far as possible any disincentives to study, particularly for the youngest age groups. These issues do not exist to the same extent with the range of adult payments. There is little evidence that people are locked out of opportunities because of an inability to transfer between payments. Opportunities to study,

train or reenter the workforce seem far more likely to be constrained by lack of appropriate programs or supports than by the structure of social security payments.

If simplification is to be pursued, it is quite possible for it to be advanced in a minimalist, but generally positive, way. Such an approach would essentially maintain the different treatment of sole parents, unemployed and people with disabilities but within a single retitled payment (just as in the Youth Allowance the treatment of full-time students remains very different from full-time jobseekers). Allowing broad categories to remain within a unified payment would allow different income tests if needed, recognising for example the lower likelihood of sole parents and people with disabilities gaining sufficient full-time work to take them entirely out of the social security system.

Again, such broad categories could be used to continue to exempt sole parents and people with disabilities from the work testing and activity testing/Mutual Obligation requirements now imposed on unemployed people.

Payment simplification could also be used to fix up two of the major failing of the current social security system:

- the inadequate base rates for unemployed people; and
- the harsh and excessive use of 'breaching' (reducing unemployment payments for people not complying with 'Mutual Obligation' or other Centrelink or Job Network directives).

For example, the payment of a participation supplement designed to lift unemployment allowances to pension rates might be the object of any 'participation testing' (as opposed to the base payment being tested, as is now the case). Such an approach could make sanctions for not complying with activity tests more proportionate to the offences for which these fines are being levied (see Siemon 2000b for further details).

A range of possibilities will no doubt emerge as the final report of the Reference Group appears and the Government's own agenda becomes clearer—something which might happen very quickly, given the electoral cycle. ACOSS (2000) has rightly pointed out that it is the detail which will determine whether any proposals for simplification are actually going to be helpful or regressive.

Beyond social security reform

In the meantime, the Government has signalled its intentions by announcing 'welfare reform pilots' in the recent budget. These programs allow 'Mutual Obligation' to be extended to groups for whom community sympathy favours a gentler hand than it does young unemployed (Eardley et al. 2000).

The Brotherhood has long believed that people who are social security recipients should have more opportunities to gain from paid employment.

We need to be very clear on exactly what problem we are trying to solve through further reform. . .

The vast majority of people aspire to build a higher living standard than that offered by social security. The difficulties they face seem to be far more to do with a lack of jobs, the changing pattern of demand for labour and their inability to acquire the skills they need in the different environment. Reforming the social security system will, in itself, do little to address these constraints on opportunity.

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Impacts of poverty on children

The Children's Task Force, chaired by The Hon Alastair Nicholson, Chief Justice, Family Court of Australia, commissioned the Brotherhood to write a 'status report' on the nature of, impact and potential responses to child poverty in Australia. 'No child…' Child poverty in Australia *was written by* **Alison McClelland**, *then Director of Social Action and Research, and has just been released.*

The impacts of child poverty may be usefully divided into three interacting areas:

- material and psychological hardship and stress;
- isolation and exclusion; and
- longer-term impacts as adults.

Hardship and stress

People with inadequate incomes typically give accounts of their difficulties in meeting basic costs, including struggling to pay for food, accommodation, clothing, education, health care, utilities, transport and recreation and trying to balance competing demands.

The Brotherhood's Life Chances study found that by the age of 6 years, the children's mothers on low incomes over longer periods reported that they found it difficult to meet costs associated with clothing, medicine, school, birthdays and toys for their children (Taylor & Macdonald 1998).

In a country such as Australia, much of the harmful impact of poverty on parents and children comes from the stress and alienation connected with having a very low income; the continual juggling of finances, financial uncertainty in some cases and very often the sense of being different and less worthwhile. For children, the impact of stress (and unhappiness) may be direct or indirect through the parents' experiences and behaviour.

Isolation and exclusion

Fegan and Bowes (1999) find isolation a significant problem for many children in Australia with the following aspects relevant to child poverty.

First, high rates of mobility can have an isolating impact, especially if accompanied by limited parental income, education and assistance from other families in the new area.

Second, housing costs and availability can isolate low-income families in concentrations of public housing or in mobile homes and caravan parks. Fegan and Bowes comment:

> Life can be stressful for families living in caravan parks for a number of reasons, not the least being the intensity of close living. Children in this situation are also at increased risk of truancy and non-enrolment at school. (1999, p.118)

Homelessness is perhaps the extreme manifestation of isolation and stress for children arising from the combination of low income and housing difficulties. Mission Australia (Jarque 1997) reports Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) data as indicating that 7,556 families with children became homeless in a six-month period during 1996. Research by Bethany Family Care and by Hanover Welfare Agency with the Royal Children's Hospital found that the impact of homelessness, accompanied by other factors such as family violence and abuse, included isolation, interrupted schooling and limited social interaction along with behavioural disturbances, including fear, distress and aggressiveness (Efron et al. 1996; Horsley et al. 1995).

The Brotherhood's Life Chances study (Taylor & Macdonald 1998) found that, at age six, the children in families on low incomes had more

...the harmful impact of poverty on parents and children comes from the stress and alienation connected with having a very low income

isolated lives in that they were significantly less likely than other children to:

- live in a neighbourhood their parents saw as excellent for children;
- play with friends away from school;
- be involved in sport, music or dance lessons;
- be involved in any formal activities; and
- have been away on holiday in the previous year.

Longer-term impacts

Australian research, mainly concerned with secondary school children, indicates that family poverty and low socioeconomic status are consistently related to poorer school performance and low school retention rates. Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, early school leavers and those with low achievement at school are more likely to be unemployed, out of the labour market, or to be in precarious casual, part-time employment (McClelland et al. 1998; McClelland & Macdonald 1999).

Not all children living on low incomes will be badly affected by their parents' circumstances and while what happens to a child in the early years of life can be vital for later on, such experiences are not completely deterministic. This point is well summarised by Taylor and Macdonald as follows:

> There is considerable evidence that links early childhood experience with later childhood outcomes, although such links are not immutable. Rutter (1989), in a comprehensive discussion of the long-term effects of early experience and review of research findings over three decades, notes that outcomes following early adversity are diverse and that long-term effects are heavily dependent on subsequent life experiences (1998, p.4).

Impacts of poverty on families and children

- difficulties in meeting basic costs
- financial stress
- stressful relationships
- isolation and exclusion
- poorer health
- poorer school performance

For further details, or to order a copy of the report, contact:

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Rooming house trends in the City of Yarra

The Social Issues Network (SIN), a group of human service agencies in the City of Yarra, has been keen to ensure that the special needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged people who live in rooming houses in the municipality are met, now and in the future. They were concerned that increases in the price of land within the municipality, combined with new standards for rooming houses due to take effect by December 1999, could lead to a further decline in affordable housing and that conditions for some residents were inappropriate for the level of care they required. However, solid data on the number of rooming houses in the City of Yarra was difficult to access and information on the demographics and needs of residents had not been documented. The Brotherhood was commissioned to undertake a survey and census.

Decline in availability

Results of the survey supported the agency workers' concerns of a steady decline in the number of rooms. At the end of 1999, there were half as many private rooms in the municipality as there were in 1992. There had been a loss of approximately 44 rooms in the previous 12 months.

The report of the survey (Jope forthcoming) provides information about rooming house residents from the perspective of support service staff, rooming house proprietors as well as the residents themselves, and it reinforces concerns about rooming house accommodation. These concerns include the sub-standard conditions of some rooming houses and barriers to residents' access to, and the quality of, support services. The residents' aspirations for more independent accommodation were noted along with their lack of housing alternatives, other than public and community housing. The proprietors generally felt that real estate pressures and the unmet special needs of residents would act as incentives to change the focus of their investment properties. There was also an indication of a further, less visible decrease in access to low-cost private rooms. This decrease seems to be in response to an increased demand for rooms by workers, students and tourists, who are able to pay higher rents and have higher housing expectations. The opportunity to upgrade existing rooming houses has been taken by some proprietors and the trend seems likely to continue.

This trend appears to have resulted in a polarisation in the supply of rooms. At one end of the continuum, the low to medium-income earners and tourists may enjoy an improved standard of rooming house. At the other end, residents dependent on government benefits and who have special needs often have no option but to suffer substandard accommodation.

There has been a relatively slight increase in the number of publicly-owned rooms that, according to residents and service providers, provide a comparatively higher standard of accommodation at an affordable price. However, demand greatly exceeds supply. Yarra Community Housing was able to house only 9 per cent of people who sought accommodation with them in 1998–99.

Rooming houses in the City of Yarra accommodate many people who actually require a level of supported accommodation but are expected—and often want—to live independently, with or without the assistance of community support services. These residents include:

- those who have relocated to the inner city to access specialist services;
- people who have experienced periods of homelessness;
- those who experience episodes of mental illness and/or are suffering the effects of alcohol and other drug abuse; and
- people who have been discharged early from hospital and/or require ongoing (non-acute) medical attention and personal care.

Policy implications

This diversity of needs amongst rooming house residents has implications for the notion of 'community care'. Services for elderly people, people with disabilities, people with non-acute medical conditions and even people who suffer substance abuse, are increasingly being provided 'in the community'. An assumption underlying this model of service provision is that people have a home in which they can be assisted by support services—this is problematic when considering low-income rooming house residents, living in insecure and/or substandard

Yarra Community Housing was able to house only 9 per cent of people who sought accommodation in 1998–99.

Only connect

accommodation. Another problem is that the majority of residents are reliant on government benefits and may not be prepared or able to pay fees charged for some services.

The report found that the most vulnerable residents are, and will continue to be, disadvantaged when competing for low-cost housing. This disadvantage is a result of:

- the ongoing process of gentrification within the City of Yarra that continues to push housing prices up and reduce the supply of low-cost housing;
- the complex needs of some rooming house residents;
- the limited knowledge of support services held by residents and proprietors; and
- the unsatisfactory experiences that some proprietors claim to have had with some support services, resulting in many proprietors declaring a preference for 'tenants without problems'.

The Social Issues Network will use the findings of this report to advocate for improved housing options and service provision for rooming house residents.

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The Brotherhood has committed itself to substantial work over the next three years to promote an Australia free of poverty. This goal raises many questions: What would an Australia free of poverty look like? What are the actions we can take, both on a structural level and as individuals, to help bring this about? How do we raise awareness of poverty and contribute to dialogue and public debate—especially on values?

As an initial step, one of our strategies was to mail out 'poverty postcards' with the Brotherhood's May appeal, inviting people to respond with their thoughts and ideas on poverty. Many people took the trouble to respond at some length, sending in detailed handwritten letters. The level of passion and interest revealed confirms the emotive strength of poverty as an issue—and also its complexity, as responses varied widely.

What did people say?

More people were interested in sharing possible ways to lessen or eradicate poverty than suggesting causes.

> Any society with poor people is a rotten society and that means a rotten government. The poor shouldn't have to rely on charity. Tax the rich more heavily.

> Develop arguments by which governments might be persuaded to match Brotherhood (or other agencies') support for suitable projects on a dollar for dollar basis.

> I would like you to challenge government actions that give rise to poverty or that put the burden of doing something about it onto voluntary groups.

Many people placed the onus of responsibility on federal government, and saw taxation as the key (under-used) mechanism to address poverty and disadvantage in Australia. Some were prepared to pay more tax themselves, while many felt 'others' weren't paying enough tax: namely the well-off and multinational corporations. A 'poverty levy' was mooted with proceeds going to fund social programs and rebuild the public sector. However, the most common response was an action we can all take as individuals and in our work: raising awareness.

A sense of compassion and an awareness of our connectedness to one another are essential in creating an Australia (and ultimately, world) free of poverty. American author bell hooks' words challenge us: 'If all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children' (*All about love*, 2000). What are the implications of this challenge?

What next?

While not wishing to impose artificial order on what was a diverse range of contributions, one lesson is clear. The Brotherhood cannot send simplistic messages. Poverty *is* complex, and people living on low incomes are not a homogenous group. We have been saying that for years in our research and service work. Others know it too.

> What is poverty? I am in what is considered to be the low income bracket. Is this poverty? As a very young child I have been hungry. Do you know what poverty is? I don't know how to deal with it.

The 'poverty postcards' are an initial step to help inform the Brotherhood's thinking as we continue to find new ways to engage with others in our pursuit of an Australia free of poverty. These engagements will be helped by the next phase of our Understanding Poverty project; through testing new forms of communication with different audiences; and through helping Brotherhood supporters find new ways to act.

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Work in progress

Defenders of Native Title Community Education Project

The Defenders of Native Title Victoria (Inc.) was established in 1997 to fight the Howard Government's amendments to the Native Title Act (1993). The amendments, also known as the '10 point plan', aimed to further disadvantage indigenous Australians' chances of being successful in a native title application. As a result, over 180 concerned Victorians from differing sectors of our community formed Defenders. The structure is based on Victoria's electoral regions with most of the 37 electorates having representation from people involved in defending native title and land justice for indigenous Australians.

Understanding the realities

The Community Education Project aims to further promote local action by revealing the truth and assisting Victorian people to inform each other to lobby their respective local governments; along with the state and federal hierarchy. A group of volunteer speakers will be trained who will then be available to address differing groups within the Victorian community. We hope to cover a range of audiences such as primary and secondary schools, tertiary institutions, union groups, reconciliation groups and so on. We are currently compiling a kit and planning workshops to inform and train people in this much-needed community activity.

We would like to see a diverse group of participants involved in the training; young and old, indigenous and non-indigenous. You don't have to know it all—you just have to have an enthusiasm to assert the truth of our history, inform people about the realities of land justice and understand the role we play in creating justice in Australia.

Hearing the realities

Alternatively, if you would like to host a speaker please contact our Community Education Officer who will organise to have someone visit your school, educational institution or community group. We hope to have people ready to speak by August.

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Poverty on the fringe

The Brotherhood of St Laurence currently runs a variety of community services located in Melbourne's metropolitan fringe, primarily in the south in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula area, but to a lesser extent in the north from a base in Craigieburn. The services at Craigieburn were initially established because of concerns in the late 1980s about 'locational disadvantage' in the new outer suburbs. Given the range of government policy changes and other changes since then, it seems timely to ask: what are the issues of locational disadvantage in the outer suburbs in 2000?

The aim of this new project is to explore issues related to poverty on the metropolitan fringe of Melbourne in order to extend our knowledge of current locational factors in poverty and to inform the focus of the Brotherhood's work in outer areas.

Major questions to be addressed include: What are the experiences of people on low incomes living in outer areas? What is the impact of available social infrastructure on their lives? The interaction of the availability of affordable housing, employment and transport is another focus.

The main sources of data for the project will be:

- the literature and available statistics
- consultations with Brotherhood service providers, state and local bureaucrats and planners
- focus groups with residents on low incomes in particular locations.

The approach taken by this study is to consider in a more general way some of the diversity of Melbourne's outer areas and to explore in more detail three local government areas—the City of Hume to the north of Melbourne and to the south the City of Frankston and the Shire of Mornington.

These local areas can all be viewed as the outskirts of Melbourne, but they contain a wide mix of locations, from post-war public housing estates to the fast growing new suburbs to semi-rural and rural areas.

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Work in progress

'Work for the Dole' consultations

Peter Loukopoulos, a student on placement at the Brotherhood, is currently undertaking consultations with 'Work for the Dole' providers and participants. The project aims to gain an understanding of the overall strengths and weaknesses of the 'Work for the Dole' (WFD) scheme from these perspectives.

While the Brotherhood is not delivering WFD, the findings of the research will be used to further improve and contribute to our knowledge of the day-to-day running of WFD, and will assist in developing our policy position.

The intention is to adopt an in-depth case study approach and examine four currently running projects: two projects from sponsors who are employment and training-focussed and two from sponsors who are community-based organisations. Participants from each project will take part in focus groups while representatives of the sponsor organisation will be interviewed.

It is hoped the research will provide insight into various aspects of WFD delivery such as what the placement involves; what learnings are occurring; issues pertaining to voluntary–compulsory placements; administrative requirements; monitoring and supervision issues.

The rationale behind having two employment and training-focussed sponsors and two community-based organisations is that the nature of a project and the approach the sponsor organisation takes to a project could vary greatly. For example, it is conceivable that many employment and training-focussed sponsors provide additional training in a WFD project, despite such training not being a requirement.

Currently, the research is in the middle of its planned course, and investigators are approaching potential projects and scheduling interview and focus group times.

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World march of women against poverty and violence

The Fédération des femmes du Québec, an umbrella organisation of women's groups, is bringing together feminist activists worldwide to march on the United Nations headquarters in New York. The project aims to call attention to the fact that global poverty and violence take their greatest toll on women. It will mobilise activists through regional marches and campaigns that will culminate in the UN march on International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (Tuesday 17 October 2000).

Why bother? Women form the majority of the 1.5 billion people who live on $1 US per day or less. Primary victims of the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programs, they are more likely to experience illiteracy, and are the first to suffer from a lack of access to social services, good health, water, land, housing and education. They are also the main victims of war, violence, rape, and sexual trafficking.

The campaign's slogan, '2000 good reasons to march', invites local groups to add their own specific demands to the title. In Australia, attention will be focused on eliminating poverty and violence. To get involved, or to find out more information, contact:
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
GPO Box 2094
Adelaide SA 5001
(08) 8296 4357
cathpete@camtech.net.au
Australian website: www.uq.net.au/march2000/
Québec website: www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000/

Work in progress

Creating employment pathways

The Creating Employment Pathways (CEP) Project is a collaboration between the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne Citymission, Hanover Welfare Services and the Dusseldorp Skills Forum. Liz Dearn has been appointed as Project Worker.

The overall aim of the CEP Project is to identify and develop coordinated pathways through education and training into employment for young people. Limited opportunities for young people to participate in quality employment programs and a lack of coordination of the pathways through education and training compound the barriers young people face in gaining employment.

Phase one of CEP Project, currently underway, is to identify existing education, training and employment programs available to people aged 15 to 24 who are unemployed or at risk at becoming unemployed. The internet has provided an excellent tool for the early stages of this audit and has enabled us to sketch an outline of what is available through both Commonwealth and State funding sources.

Interviews with a variety of stakeholders will be conducted, enabling an exploration of the gaps, barriers and opportunities in current education, training and employment programs. Although the short timeframes of the project do not allow extensive consultations with young people, a link through the InfoXchange website will invite comments from young people on their experiences.

Early in the project we will be inviting a broad group of stakeholders together for a report on issues that have emerged from the phase one audit. Phase two will involve an exploration of alternative program models. Workshops and discussions with key stakeholders will provide valuable input into this stage of the consultation.

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Employment options for young people with intellectual disabilities

The Federal Government is currently expressing concern about the increasing number of people receiving the Disability Support Pension. At the same time, issues of so-called 'welfare dependency' and 'mutual obligation' are being given prominence in policy debate. The underlying assumption seems to be that there is ready availability of employment. Policy changes in this area could produce considerable disadvantage for people who already experience a range of difficulties, particularly as 'user pays' charges for some services have become more significant.

This new project has developed from our concern about the extent and nature of the links between poverty, disability and access to employment. Anna Charlton, an honours Public Policy student from Melbourne University, is undertaking the research with the Brotherhood under the Ronald Henderson Foundation internship program.

The purpose of the project is to examine the barriers and opportunities for employment for young people with intellectual disabilities in order to further our understanding of the connection between disability, employment opportunities and income support.

The research will include young people leaving special schools, those in both open and sheltered employment situations and those seeking work. Anna is examining how young people with intellectual disabilities choose to work in particular employment environments and how this decision affects them, particularly in relation to their financial situation. In addition she plans to interview people who are working with these young people, including school staff and employers and service providers.

This information will be used to assess current Government policies and programs and to make suggestions for policy changes.

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Is poverty in Australia a problem?

Reports from the Understanding Poverty project are available for $6 each plus $2.50 postage:

Jeannette Johnson, *The invisible Australians: community understandings of poverty.*

Jeannette Johnson, *Poverty in Australia: measuring community attitudes.*

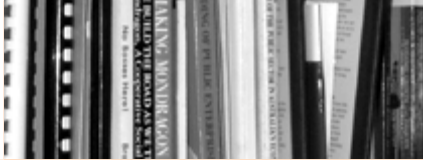
Denis Muller, *Poverty in Australia: listening to journalists.*

Janet Taylor, *Poverty in Australia: listening to decision-makers.*

Janet Taylor, *Australian conceptions of poverty: reviewing the literature.*

Jeannette Johnson & Janet Taylor, *Growing apart: A new look at poverty in Australia* (summary of all five reports)

Contact **Mas Generis** on (03) 9483 1386
mgeneris@bsl.org.au



New information on poverty, housing and unemployment

The following are among the latest significant acquisitions received by the Brotherhood library

ACT Poverty Task Group 2000, *Telling the story: report on the ACT Poverty Task Group Community Consultation*, ACTCOSS, Canberra.

Adam Smith Institute 2000, *Making welfare work: lessons from the best and worst state welfare reform programmes*, http://www.adamsmith.org.uk/policy/briefings/make.htm.

Anxo, D & Flood, L 1999, *Household income distribution and hours of work: an international comparison*, Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, New York. Also available online: http://lissy.ceps.lu/wpapers.htm.

Australian Council of Social Service 2000, *Work, wages and welfare: selected papers from the 1999 ACOSS congress*, Australian Council of Social Service, Sydney.

Birrell, B, Dibden, J & Wainer, J 2000, *Regional Victoria: why the bush is hurting*, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, Melbourne.

Boreham, P, Dow, G & Leet, M 1999, *Room to manoeuvre: political aspects of full employment*, Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

The Boston Consulting Group 2000, 'New directions:

early intervention to reduce long-Harkness, S & Waldfogel, J 1999, *The family gap in pay: evidence from seven industrialised countries*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, London. Also available online: http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/publications/casepaper.asp.

Heath, I, Haines, A, Glover, J & Hetzel, D 2000, *Open invitation from International Poverty and Health Network to all health care professionals: help reduce the burden of ill-health due to poverty*, http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/172_08_170400/heath/heath.html.

Hunter, R 2000, *The beauty therapist, the mechanic, the geoscientist and the librarian: addressing undervaluation of women's work*, University of Technology, Sydney.

Kangas, O & Palme, J 1999, *Does social policy matter? Poverty cycles in OECD countries*, Luxembourg Income Study, Syracuse, New York. Also available online: http://lissy.ceps.lu/wpapers.htm.

Lamb, S & Rumberger, R 1999, *The initial work and education experiences of early school leavers: a comparative study of Australia and the United States*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell, Vic.

Lee, J, Probert, B & Watts, R (eds) 1999, *Work in the new economy: policies, programs, populations*, Centre for Applied Social Research, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne.

Loundes, J 1999, *Labour productivity in Australian workplaces: evidence from AWIRS*, Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Mackay, H 1999, *Turning point: Australians choosing their future*, Macmillan, Sydney.

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council 1998, Economic and demographic profiles 1998, ABS consultancy.

Mukherjee, D 1999, *Socio-economic status and school system enrolments*, Australian Centre for Equity through Education, Sydney.

Nevile, A 2000, *State of the family report 2000*, Anglicare Australia, Melbourne.

Peracchi, F 1999, *Earnings inequality in international perspective*, Syracuse University, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, New York. Also available online: http://lissy.ceps/lu/wpapers.htm.

Purdy, M & Banks, D (eds) 1999, *Health and exclusion: policy and practice in health provision*, Routledge, London.

Smith, M, Ewer, P 1999, *Choice and coercion: women's experiences of casual work*, Evatt Foundation, Sydney.

Sparkes, J 1999, *Schools, education and social exclusion*, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, London. Also available online: http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/publications/casepaper.asp.

Stretton, H 1999, *Economics: a new introduction*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney.

Szukalska, A, Percival, R & Walker, A 1999, *Modelling child care utilisation and benefits*, National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, University of Canberra, Canberra.

Turrell, G, Oldenburg, B, McGuffog, I & Dent, R 1999, *Socioeconomic determinants of health: towards a national research program and a policy and intervention agenda*, Queensland University of Technology, School of Public Health, Centre for Public Health Research, Brisbane.

Information services for the public

The Brotherhood of St Laurence library offers a specialist focus on the issues of poverty, unemployment, aged care, social policy and welfare, taxation and housing. It can also provide, for the cost of copying and mailing, up-to-date information sheets on poverty and unemployment as well as information on the Brotherhood, its services and its publications.

The library is open to students, community groups and members of the public from 9 am to 5 pm, Tuesday to Thursday. Books can be borrowed by the public through the inter-library loan system (inquire at your regular library).

To find out whether we can help you with the information you require, ring the Library on (03) 9483 1387 or (03) 9483 1388, or e-mail library@bsl.org.au. Further information can be found at *www.bsl.org.au.*

Work in progress

Dental hospital consultation

The Royal Dental Hospital consumer consultation is a joint project between the Brotherhood, the Health Issues Centre (HIC) and the Royal Dental Hospital (RDHM) undertaken with funding from Dental Health Services Victoria (DHSV). The project builds on past HIC work on community accountability and user consultation mechanisms for health services and past Brotherhood research on dental health service use by lower-income Victorians.

The project has two parts—the first being to provide some consumer input into the design of the new dental hospital building. Beyond this, the project aims to:

- gain a broad perspective from lower-income service users on the role and value of the RDHM and their past experiences in terms of access, service environment and quality of service;
- provide the RDHM with mechanisms or proposals to continue user consultation on issues of relevance; and
- resource an ongoing consultative panel of interested consumers (who are current service users) to provide comments and suggestions for ways to improve Victoria's public dental health service.

Such a move towards consumer consultation in public health care can be seen as the implementation of the vision and some of the goals of the Consumer Focus Collaboration, a commitment by Commonwealth, State and Territory Health Departments to the redesign of health care processes and systems fostering a strong focus on consumers.

The first (now completed) phase of the RDHM consumer consultation was designed specifically to gain input into the design of the new dental hospital. Within four separate focus groups, conducted by Brotherhood researchers and generously auspiced by the RDHM, 28 dental hospital users enthusiastically gave their advice and ideas about how to make the new hospital more 'user-friendly'.

The new hospital is scheduled for completion in 2002 and will be centrally located for public transport users on Swanston Street, Carlton, between Grattan Street and Lynch's Lane, conveniently sharing a campus with the existing Royal Women's Hospital.

The results of phase one were presented to key stakeholders from the RDHM, DHSV, School of Dental Science, Melbourne University and the Department of Human Services as well as representatives from the project management and architectural companies involved in building the new hospital. Inclusion of the consumers' ideas in the design of the new hospital will of course be subject to their viability, and, as with everything these days, budget constraints. Nonetheless, all those in attendance at the presentation believed that seeking advice about the design of the hospital from those who will use it was a step in the right direction and hoped that some of the innovations could be realised.

Work on phase two of the RDHM consumer consultation has begun and key findings will be reported in a future issue of *Brotherhood Comment*.

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