



Speech 10 April 2015

## **Maternal, Child and Family Health Nurses Australia Association**

### **6th Biennial Conference**

Good morning.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and I extend my sincere condolences to the family and colleagues of Carol Friday.

May I make a special welcome to our interstate delegates. I am pleased to be part of the Maternal, Child and Family Health Nurses Australia Association conference this year, and would like to place on record my appreciation of the important role you have in the early lives of children and young people.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People is an independent statutory role, which reports to the Western Australian Parliament.

Those of you from other parts of Australia will know there are Commissioners and Child Guardians in your home states, and each has a slightly different purpose and function, however, we do meet and collaborate on national issues.

Under the Act I have a range of functions to promote and enhance the wellbeing of children and young people under 18 years of age throughout Western Australia.

In undertaking these functions I must observe four principles, two of which are very relevant to your work:

That children and young people are entitled to live in a caring and nurturing environment

That parents, families and communities have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of their children and young people and should be supported in carrying out their role.

While I am an advocate for the wellbeing of all WA's children and young people, I am required to have a special regard for WA's 36,000 Aboriginal children and young people, and those who are vulnerable for any reason.

The work of the office is informed by the views and opinions of children and young people and the best available knowledge and evidence of what works well.

A key part of the Commissioner's role is to consult children and young people and to ensure their views are heard and responded to.

Last year I undertook a major consultation with over 1200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people about what is important to them and what will help them to do well, and the outcomes of this will be tabled in State Parliament in a few months' time.

Later this year, my office will consult with children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, focussing on those from refugee and migrant backgrounds. With around a quarter of WA's children and young people being born outside of Australia, this is an important area of work.

In 2013 there were more than 570,000 children and young people under the age of 18 living in WA – representing around 26% of the total population.

Western Australia's Aboriginal population is a young population – with more than 40 per cent of Aboriginal people in our State under the age of 18 years.

Over the last decade, the number of 0 to 17 year-olds in WA increased by almost 90,000, or 18.5 per cent.

The largest increase – 28.5 per cent – occurred in the early childhood age group of 0 to eight years. There were more than 34,000 births registered in WA in 2013, the largest ever recorded in the State – no doubt many of you here today are at the 'front line' of supporting the wellbeing needs of this vast and growing number of babies and parents.

Early childhood was identified as a priority area by my predecessor, Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner Michelle Scott.

This remains a priority for my office as it is difficult to overstate the importance of the early childhood years.

As you will be aware, research clearly shows that from before birth through early childhood, a child's physical, emotional and cognitive skills and capacities develop at a rate which exceeds that of any other stage of life.

This period is the foundation for later development in all domains and sets the trajectory for learning, physical and mental health, behaviour and wellbeing through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

Healthy development is underpinned by secure attachment and loving and responsive relationships with parents and other caregivers.

The evidence is clear – parents' and caregivers interactions and the environments they provide have a significant impact on children's development and wellbeing.

Last July I tabled two major reports on children and young people's wellbeing in the WA Parliament, which comprise the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework.

*The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a broad picture of how under 18 year-olds are faring, according to 40 specific measures of health and wellbeing, grouped under eight critical domains.

It shows that while WA's children and young people are generally doing well, there are gaps in their wellbeing that require urgent attention. An ongoing concern is the significant disparities in outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

In 2011, six per cent of babies born in WA weighed less than 2,500 grams. However, for babies born to Aboriginal mothers, the percentage was much higher at 13 per cent.

In regional and remote areas of WA, there remains an increased risk of perinatal and post-natal deaths, with the rates being higher for babies of Aboriginal mothers.

Nearly one in four WA children are 'developmentally vulnerable' when they enter school, with children from low socio-economic areas, very remote areas, Aboriginal children and boys particularly vulnerable groups.

It is vital that young children who are vulnerable are identified early so they can receive the services and support they need.

A significant proportion of parents report that they lack confidence, feel unsupported and that they can find parenting demanding and stressful.

We know that the support available to parents, both formal and informal, is an important factor in their capacity to parent – support from family, friends and community, along with timely information and access to quality programs and services are all essential.

A key question for me is what do we need to do to design services to respond to the needs of families today and into tomorrow? We need to take into account how the population and expectations are changing, - for example, the impact of fly in fly out families, and how to tap into new and constantly evolving communication mediums.

As an aside, I think of how my own experience contrasted with my mother's before me – and what my daughter's experience is likely to be. My mother's experience during the baby boom period post war was of a rapid succession of babies - my mother being 19 years of age when she had her first child, and 34 years old by the time she had me, her last child. My mother describes a neighbourhood where backyards echoed with the sounds of young mothers and their toddlers, although

her recollection was not one of playful laughter and glee but more one of frazzled mothers yelling and shouting!

A shared experience I had with my mother however, following the birth of her last child (myself) in the 1950's, was the local child health nurse who offered a welcome sanctuary, supportive knowledge and reassurance that all was well.

I think of myself during my early years of parenting – and how I accessed knowledge largely through books read late at night, tips from fellow mothers from the local playgroup in the very early years before I returned to work, and, in common with my mother, visits to the child health nurse.

I then look at my daughter and her friends who, instead of opening a book are more at home on Facebook or their smart phones. Despite the greater reliance on electronic forms of communication and contact through social media, I have no doubt that her contact with the local child health nurse will be just as important as it was to my mother and myself, and that ultimately it will be hard to replace being able to actually speak to a real person at a crucial time who can provide some reassuring, practical and timely advice and information.

The mediums may differ, but some of the core needs remain the same – seeking the reassurance that all is ok, that you are not the only one who sometimes needs some extra support – and that it is okay to ask for help.

I believe that greater priority needs to be placed on support for parents and parenting. Although there is a variety of programs and services in WA there are substantial gaps – for example in regional areas - and greater coordination and integration is needed.

A positive step recently in WA has been the commitment to establish 16 Child and Parent Centres on school sites in vulnerable communities. Coordinated by community service providers, the centres are based on a model of integrated service delivery, and are intended to improve access to a range of early learning, parenting, child and maternal health and wellbeing programs to support families with young children, from birth to 8 years of age. I have had the opportunity to see a number of these centres in operation, and they have quickly become a hub of activity and in high demand by local families. The challenge now is to broaden the initiative to include other communities to respond to the rapid population growth which many localities are experiencing.

There is strong evidence that public investment in high-quality early childhood services for children, their parents and families will have positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of children who access them and deliver significant social and economic returns over time.

In some areas this means more services – however it also means implementing evidence-based programs in ways that have been found to be effective.

This may involve new ways of working, but the benefits to children’s wellbeing and development will make it worthwhile.

The role of community and maternal health nurses in all of these areas is crucial.

Your work to support the evolving needs of young children and parents is crucial to the current and future prosperity of our community.

I wish you well for the rest of your conference. I did note the feedback from the evaluation of the 2013 conference held in the ACT that it was the ‘best conference ever’ – without sounding too parochial I am confident that based on the program you have in front of you, today’s conference set an even higher benchmark, and will be rated the ‘best conference ever’!

Thank you.