

## **Guest editors' introduction: Special issue on evidence-based prevention**

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This special issue of the *Australian Review of Public Affairs* arose from papers presented at a conference run by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in Melbourne in September 2009. The theme of the conference was 'Transforming Australia for our children's future: Making prevention work'. The conference was attended by more than 560 delegates from the policy, practice and research communities, and featured many opportunities for dialogue on critical issues as well as strong and active participation by youth. Eminent speakers discussed the urgent need to transform Australia into a society that truly nurtures and respects children and young people, to improve their wellbeing and prevent the problems that are increasingly affecting them.

Subsequent to the conference, Ann Sanson, as conference program chair, was invited—along with Brian Head and Gerry Redmond—to co-edit a group of papers based on the conference theme with particular relevance for Australian policy debates. We invited several authors of conference papers to revise their presentations to highlight conceptual and applied issues of particular relevance to current Australian policy practitioners and researchers. These revised papers then underwent the usual rigorous review process of this journal.

The conference had been premised on several key ideas. Firstly, Australia's international standing on child and youth wellbeing is currently at best 'just average' among the rich industrial countries (Emerson 2010), whereas given our prosperity we should aspire to be 'excellent'. Secondly, preventing problems is more effective and more ethical than a focus on treatment. Prevention approaches are effective in delivering improved health and wellbeing to individuals, and social and economic benefits to the community. Thirdly, a strong and effective evidence-based preventive approach requires a major change in the operating assumptions and priorities of funders, governments and the practice, policy and research communities. For

example, funding for prevention programs remains only a fraction of recurrent funding for treatment, and funding for prevention research follows a similar pattern. Finally, it is a core principle of ARACY that collaborative action should be a mechanism for progressively transforming Australia into a society which truly values and invests in children and young people, thus creating communities in which they can all thrive and better achieve their potential. The conference was a vehicle for ARACY to foster discussion around the many issues that represent both opportunities and impediments to Australia becoming a more fully inclusive society, in which improving the wellbeing of children and young people would be in the forefront of people's minds.

The conference was organised around three key topic areas: macro-level prevention (through action at a national level); the politics and processes of social change (including the role of social marketing); and 'prevention pays' (the long-term benefits accruing from evidence-based prevention). The papers in this special issue attempt to develop aspects of these three themes.

One important outcome of the conference was the production of a Conference Declaration and Call to Action (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2009). This was developed with input from delegates at the end of the conference and received their overwhelming support. The Declaration outlines critical issues and challenges facing Australia today and the principles which should guide action to improve wellbeing for young Australians. Four key strategies were put forward: (1) make the wellbeing of children and young people a national priority; (2) set internationally comparable health and wellbeing targets for children and young people for the next twenty years; (3) agree on a national child and youth development agenda integrating existing early years, middle years and youth agendas; and (4) develop a collaborative research plan on the prevention of problems affecting children and young people, linked with the child and youth development agenda.

The call to action on these strategies was directed to the entire Australian community (national, state/territory and local governments and community and business leaders), and since the conference ARACY has been active in taking the Declaration to all these bodies. Good progress has been made on each of the four strategies. For example, regarding Strategy 1, in December 2010 the COAG Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) agreed to a strategy to better engage parents, carers and the community, to increase their understanding of early childhood development and thereby influence their interactions with children to maximise early childhood outcomes. On Strategy 2, ARACY has undertaken extensive consultation with its members; and a strategy towards setting targets (while building on existing agendas and initiatives) is being planned in Western Australia. Progress on Strategy 3 has included a workshop at

Parliament House in Canberra in December 2010, and ARACY has convened a high level steering group to develop a National Action Plan for child and young people in Australia (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2010). For Strategy 4, ARACY was commissioned to undertake an analysis of research gaps in the ‘early years’ and will progress this via further work through the National Action Plan and the early years sub-network of ARACY.

This special issue represents another valuable outcome from the conference, drawing together a set of papers covering multiple angles on the need to shift towards a prevention agenda for Australian children and youth. The first paper, by Brian Head and Gerry Redmond, ‘Making prevention work in human services for children and youth’, outlines some of the issues and difficulties related to such a shift from a policy perspective. In addition to the cost-benefit arguments, the paper draws attention to the implicit value assumptions underlying the design of prevention programs and the need to engage explicitly with such value debates. The second paper, by Rob Donovan, ‘The role for marketing in public health change programs’, outlines examples of successful social marketing based on a wide understanding of the research literature, and provides a persuasive overview of the principles underlying successful campaigns. The paper makes the case for such an approach to issues central to the wellbeing of children and youth, in order to shift community understandings of the needs of young Australians. In the third paper by Ben Edwards, Matthew Taylor and Mario Fiorini, ‘Who gets the “gift of time” in Australia? Exploring delayed primary school entry’, the authors analyse the nationwide data in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to examine factors related to differences in school starting ages across state schooling systems. In discussing the implications of this pattern, the authors bring together the perspectives of psychology and economics. This paper is an example of the work emanating from ARACY’s New Investigators Network which provides high-level mentoring to support young scholars in interdisciplinary research with a strong focus on prevention and policy-relevance. The fourth paper, by Matthew Manning, Ross Homel and Christine Smith, ‘An economic method for formulating better policies for positive child development’, is also multidisciplinary, and uses evaluation of the well-known Pathways to Prevention Program to demonstrate a new approach to economic modelling of program effectiveness. The fifth paper by Ann Sanson, Sophie Havighurst and Stephen Zubrick, ‘Building the science of prevention for children and youth’, discusses the scholarship of prevention science and canvasses what is needed to progress an evidence-based approach to prevention ‘on the ground’. The conference saw the launch of ARACY’s Prevention Science Network which seeks to support the development of the prevention agenda through providing a forum for discussion and joint action. Finally, in a *Viewpoint* article called ‘A “new deal” for children’, Professor Don Edgar draws on his long history of advocating for children in articulating a challenging and innovative vision for the future.

The co-editors of this group of papers thank *ARPA's* Editor, Gabrielle Meagher, for the opportunity to edit this special issue, and acknowledge her constant support, patience and intellectual input into its production. Our thanks also to the authors, and to a large number of anonymous reviewers for their contributions.

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## REFERENCES

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