



Editorial Volume 2, Issue 2 Dr Randolph Bowers

What an exciting year for counselling in Australia!

cphJournal has grown from zero to three issues in this short space of time. We were honoured by our Canadian colleagues who contributed many innovative and thoughtful articles in Volume 2 Issue 1 Special Issue on Aging and Spirituality, which comprised part of their conference proceedings that went up for peer review.

On the 5 to 8 July 2006 in Brisbane, the International Association of Counselling co-hosted a large conference with the Australian Counselling Association and several other partners 'Connecting, Creating, Celebrating,' which brought practitioners together from across Australia and the world. Much to our regret, the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia (PACFA), who are another significant association in Australia, declined the invitation to co-partner with other associations on the conference. Regardless the event was a great success, and cphJournal invited the delegates to submit their conference proceedings for peer review, and this process will likely take the better part of this year to accomplish, with the aim of publishing the special issue of proceedings in the new year of 2007.

cphJournal is receiving a steady stream of papers for future Issues, and visitors to our website have increased to over 3,500 people per month in only that past six months. We are extremely pleased with these outcomes, and we are so proud to have a fantastic team to support an open-to-the-public format that is free and in accessible language. I really wish to encourage creative and multimedia submissions that include jpg format photographs and other visual media that can be printed into a PDF format. As we grow, future possibilities include inclusion of sound files and video streaming, and we welcome submissions that will encourage our team to explore these developments.

Other areas of growth relate to supporting creative approaches to narrative, story, and personal reflective essays that look outside the boxes of traditional 'research.' Please consider the in-depth nature of counselling consultations across the wide spectrum of education, health, and professional studies as a cultural landscape worth exploring, deconstructing, and re-inventing. We are also aware that many of our Board Members, including myself, have a passion for rural based counselling, education, and health issues,

Bowers R. (2006) Australian counselling at the crossroads: Debates over governance, regulation, and standards of practice - Editorial, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 2(2), i-vi, July 2006.

and we are pleased to have articles coming forward from several countries where rural issues are also at the forefront of social consciousness.

cphJournal Indigenous

Discussions related to supporting Indigenous issues are progressing, and Dr Nadine Pelling is Editing a special issue of cphJournal on Indigenous issues for future publication. To inquire about this exciting project, contact Dr Pelling at <Nadine.Pelling@unisa.edu.au>.

As part of our Editorial vision for cphJournal we wish to support an Indigenous Board of Editors who can develop an international specialisation in Indigenous issues from a multidisciplinary and wholistic perspective and applicable to the fields of counselling, education, health, social and emotional well being and community development. We admit that it is early days in the development of counselling in Australia, and Aboriginal counselling is also a very new disciplinary field. We also acknowledge that traditional approaches to helping and ‘counselling’ have always existed, and continue to be practiced today – and we encourage the articulation of these cultural practices as well as the critique and decolonization of non-Indigenous approaches to the field.

To these ends, I have had initial discussions with several Aboriginal Australian people who practice various forms of counselling, including graduates and students in Aboriginal counselling programs I am aware of. These discussions suggest that folks love the idea and see the need, but are asking for specific support and infrastructure to assist in their learning how to write for this forum, and what the forum might look like. My efforts are to link people together in writing teams, where ideas can be shared and those whose strength is in weaving words can assist the others to articulate and learn new writing skills. We also wish to support the publishing of dual language texts – in Aboriginal or First Nations languages as well as in English. These types of projects need funding support, and we sincerely ask members of the public to consider donations toward this cause.

In regards to gathering an Indigenous Circle of Board Members, when we can gather a dynamic core team together we will begin further scoping of the project, and looking for funding sources to support this direction. cphJournal is prepared to assist an Indigenous Circle/Board in hosting and publishing a unique section of the website called ‘*cphJournal Indigenous*.’ Interested people please contact me and share your ideas and interests in developing this exciting and innovative project.

Additional information

For your information, ACA is currently proposing a policy statement on evidence-based practice, which will outline some of the levels of strength of evidence that may be used to guide counsellors on various issues. The draft policy can be accessed in a forthcoming issue of *Counselling Australia*. Visit the ACA website for more information.

Several of the cphJournal Board Members have been involved in producing the first ever comprehensive counselling text book in Australasia, entitled *The Practice of Counselling*,

Bowers R. (2006) Australian counselling at the crossroads: Debates over governance, regulation, and standards of practice - Editorial, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 2(2), i-vi, July 2006.

with Thomson Publishers, Melbourne. Three of our Executive Editors acted as Editors of the book, and a wide spread of Australian based and affiliated authors contributed chapters to the work. For further information see the Thomson website <<http://www.thomsonlearning.com.au/higher/humanservices/armstrong/index.asp>>.

Congratulations to two of our Board Members, Professor Marie Battiste and Associate Professor Cathryn McConaghy in co-editing a special issue of the Australian Journal of Indigenous Education: Thinking Place: The Indigenous Humanities & Education, V34 – 2005, which was recently published during 2006. To learn more about this important journal visit <<http://www.atis.uq.edu.au/ajie/>>.

Australian counselling at the crossroads

In a landmark and historic development for the counselling profession in Australia, and following three years of efforts extended by the Victorian Department of Human Services who sponsored a research grant that was awarded to PACFA, a decision was made regarding regulation of the counselling field. The project was to investigate issues of regulation, governance, and standards of practice in Australia. In a press release of the same day, ACA stated that, ‘on August 23, 2006 at a meeting of key industry stakeholders and government, it was concluded that no regulation of the counselling industry would occur.’

From my point of view, the decision signals to the field in Australia that professional associations could consider more collaborative approaches that move beyond rhetoric and that break down the barriers of competition that may have defined past relations between groups. For example, an academic and professional journal can be a means to unite people from diverse backgrounds, and in our founding vision for cphJournal we hoped to build bridges. We are happy to work with members of any association on the Board of Editors. This symbolic and practical gesture is significant to me, because as an educationalist and someone who works at a public institution my hope is to open up discussion and debate, freely share information, and allow individuals to make their own conclusions in regards to counselling, associations in the field, and in regards to the wonderful work that is being done by many associations and their members who are often passionate about their perspectives.

In the press release from ACA noted above, ACA highlights a significant insight coming from the review in regards to protection of the public:

One of the core aims in investigating a self-regulated model for the Counselling Profession was to ascertain whether consumers of Counselling services would be better protected under a regulated model. This is of paramount importance to governments and fundamentally directs their decisions, as they are empowered by the public to implement policy in the interest of their safety.

The nature of Counselling results in very few complaints being brought against Counsellors. Counselling... is more about

Bowers R. (2006) Australian counselling at the crossroads: Debates over governance, regulation, and standards of practice - Editorial, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 2(2), i-vi, July 2006.

empowering clients to make their own decisions. Counsellors generally do not give advice, and do not deal with clinical issues. As such, the potential risk to clients from Counselling is extremely low.

Implicit in the decision of the Victorian Department of Human Services not to regulate the Counselling Profession is that customers of Counselling are not at significant risk; and that the current market driven model of the profession adequately mitigates risk to the consumer.

In regards to educational and practice standards for counselling in Australia, the field currently relies on self-regulating associations to determine their level of education for entry and level of expertise to practice. From my point of view, there is nothing inherently problematic about this already self-regulatory model of counselling, which is grounded in the almost sacred nature of an incorporated association model which keeps the control and direction of the profession in the hands of the members of associations.

From my point of view, counselling as a field in Australia is greatly strengthened by the diversity represented in the many associations that exist, and the several peak bodies who stand at the national level. Indeed, when it comes to self-regulation counsellors who are members of an association are the best people to discern what is needed for their membership, and thus for the field of counselling. And apparently the Victorian Government agrees.

As no national regulatory standard is agreed among the many associations that exist in Australia, and the recent study has determined that the government has no interest to step into what could be considered by many to be a factional professional landscape, the question remains regarding what is the best level of education and expertise to practice counselling? I believe the debates around this issue will and must continue.

In the ACA press release it was stated that:

The overwhelming majority of practicing counsellors maintain membership to an Industry Association. Membership provides them with professional affiliation; access to insurance; transparency of qualifications; a means for dealing with complaints; a Code of Good Practice; ongoing professional development and much more.

The industry has therefore established Training Standard benchmarks by virtue of Association Membership Levels. These levels reflect qualifications, experience, supervision and commitment to ongoing development. The vast majority of Counsellors have a vocational level qualification, such as a Diploma in Counselling. The decision of the government not to regulate Counselling implicitly recognises the Training Standards established through existing Association structures.

While the Victorian Government Department may have implied through their decision to not regulate counselling in that state, and by inference, the Australian Government may be unlikely to regulate counselling in any other state, and while a government department might imply that the existing status-quo of professional associations is not inherently flawed (and more particularly, does not pose a threat to public safety), these outcomes do not suggest that counsellors will necessarily be content with the status quo for practice and training standards. The existing disparity of views on standards of practice and educational qualifications in Australia still needs to be addressed by the associations and their memberships. To do this people need to work together across party lines. My perspective is that the field in Australia is changing and developing faster than many people acknowledge, and that standards need to become more uniform across the sector to ensure that practice is grounded in the best possible outcomes for clients.

Australian counselling standards and governance issues

There are many views of how to build and sustain the counselling field in Australia. The field enjoys great diversity of representation in many professional associations. At this time I wish to open up a debate by sharing my personal opinions on a few issues. It is important to acknowledge these are my opinions and analysis only, and are shared to encourage open debate. These opinions do not represent any other persons or groups.

For several years I have lobbied ACA to encourage its members to continue their education, and I have been encouraging members of other associations to do the same. Sooner than later, ACA will need to raise its standard from Diploma to Bachelor level. Soon after that, ACA will need to raise the standard to a Graduate Diploma, and then likely a Masters level to gain certification. In my view, this progression needs to occur sooner than later, and needs to be set on a public timeline that allows the majority of members to gain new qualifications. By so doing, ACA will signal to the public and to other associations in the field that ACA is committed to ensuring the highest standards of practice for counselling in Australia.

At the same time I have encouraged an acknowledgement that there are many questions that counsellors need to consider about the governance of the field in Australia. For instance, ACA was created under a legal entity of a Pty Ltd., and as such, does not constitute an incorporated association. This could raise many questions about the governance and particularly the financial accountability of the Association. To this end, I have strongly lobbied ACA leadership to change this situation, because it not only gives an incorrect message to the public about how ACA functions, but it also implies that ACA is a profit-making venture by those who own it as a business. I am told that ACA is about to change these legal frameworks, and they have openly admitted that it was a mistake to set up the organisation as a Pty Ltd. Fair enough, we learn from our mistakes.

Other questions arise when looking at the models currently being used in Australia. For example, PACFA was set up as a 'Federation of Associations,' but effectively appears to function as an Association, and indeed is an incorporated Association as such. They also

Bowers R. (2006) Australian counselling at the crossroads: Debates over governance, regulation, and standards of practice - Editorial, *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 2(2), i-vi, July 2006.

have their own unique form of membership and revenues through maintaining a national register. It may be viewed by many people that every organisation will tend to promote its own self-interests, and as PACFA evolves over time these interests will also likely develop. This suggests that the role of a Federation versus an Association may blur the boundaries of responsibilities and may cause confusion, if not for the members then certainly for others. The study noted above suggests that such confusion may exist in the minds of PACFA members who may wish to delegate their structure as a regulatory model for all other associations in Australia when in fact they themselves are one association among many. Confusion regarding roles may also involve what an 'umbrella' organisation might take on versus what those who hold up the structure – member associations will take responsibility for. From a sociological view, delegation-based politics in a professional association context seems ill advised and adds additional layers of political and administrative burdens that raise questions about the sustainable nature of governance in counselling. This raises questions about ethical and legal accountability, the ability of associations and their members to directly influence the field, and at a time in Australia when clear and unfettered leadership is essential.

These issues are certainly open for debate! And we welcome letters to the Editor, which will appear in future on this page.

I wish you every peace and contentment,
Dr Randolph Bowers