

Australian Association of Infant Mental Health (AAIMHI)

Affiliates Corner

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By Lynn Priddis

National Chair (AAIMHI)

The Australian Association of Infant Mental Health (AAIMHI) is a vibrant affiliate of WAIMH that comprises around 500 members from all over the vast Australian continent. Our AAIMHI history, like that of our country, is one that is maturing; it is advanced in many ways and young in others. AAIMHI developed from two separate state organizations in 1992 so that currently five of the six Australian States and one of two Australian Territories have their own branches that are affiliated with the National body. The sixth Australian State, Tasmania, is building interest in Infant Mental Health by co hosting the first Tasmanian Infant Mental Health Conference in November 2011 (visit our website www.aaimhi.org) for a snapshot of our association.

By way of background for WAIMH readers, Australia is a land of contrasts: In our schools we learn that it is both the world's smallest continent (a vast land that is twice the size of Europe) and also the world's largest island (spanning three oceans) and it is one of the most isolated countries in the world. Our indigenous people have a complex social system and highly developed traditions that reflect a strong affiliation with the land and that include deep care for their babies and children. Traditional values are slowly being rediscovered after Australian Aborigines suffered enormously over many decades with the advent of European settlement. Initially these settlers were mostly British convicts and their keepers, who had to endure long sea voyages to settle here. Infants and babies born into this new land were likely to have had to grow up with an independent and competitive spirit to survive harsh conditions, unfamiliar to their grandparents. Today we are a multicultural nation with many complex stories of migration and settlement.

It is likely there is a great deal in the Australian history, in the character traits of those who survived and in its geographical features that contributes to the Australian character and to the way

we parent our children. One value Australians share is an enjoyment of gatherings of like-minded people, where over food and drinks ideas and information are shared. In this spirit many of us regularly travel tens of thousands of kilometers to attend WAIMH congresses and thousands of kilometers to attend those in our own country. We value conferences as celebrations and opportunities for bringing people together in order to build relationships, re-establish connections and to share experiences. The inaugural mental health conference was held in Australia in 1991 and they have been held mostly on an annual basis since each time by a different host state on behalf of the National body. Our most recent national gathering was for the 17th National AAIMHI conference and was held in Perth in May, 2011 and this will be the focus of this article.

As with WAIMH congresses, every Australian AAIMHI conference is unique, governed by the context in which it occurs and the committees who take responsibility for making it happen on behalf of the National body. Sometimes they are run by AAIMHI alone and on other occasions they are co hosted. They are mostly held annually, with each state having many smaller gatherings throughout the year. A quick look at our newly developed website (inspired by the WAIMH website) will show that there is considerable activity around the country. Some states have monthly Saturday morning presentations where members enjoy case



Louise Newman is an ambassador for the rights of infants and children in Australia.



Shaun Tan is Australia's recent Oscar winner, who presented his picture book "The Red Tree".

presentations and discussion; others have evening presentations where members network around wine and nibbles and enjoy varied presentations by representatives of the many disciplines in AAIMHI. One really interesting presentation was on physiotherapy and IMH, with the support of members this presenter has now submitted an abstract to the WAIMH congress in CapeTown. A particularly energetic state affiliate inspires us by frequently running one and two day trainings for its members to build knowledge and capacity. More established affiliates share ideas and provide support to newer ones and to those who are struggling with adversity from natural disasters.

We all value and enjoy coming together for the National conference. In 2011 the conference was called: 'Growing up solid: Integrating emotional and mental health throughout infancy, childhood and adolescence' and was a Bi-National conference co-convened by Australian Association of Infant Mental Health (AAIMHI) and the Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatry (RANZCP) Faculty of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The title and co host arrangement reflected our commitment to the integration of understanding and treatment of mental illness from infancy to adulthood, encompassing different perspectives, organisations and cultures. We actively encourage indigenous presenters to show case their work at all our conferences, with the indigenous stream growing each year. We are also forging closer ties with WAIMH affiliates in neighboring countries beginning with New Zealand, where we share news, enjoy transferable member benefits and plan joint initiatives.

The 2011 "Growing up solid" conference was held in luxury; we like to nurture and pamper as best far as possible those participants and members who travel long distances to contribute. The setting was a five star hotel in central Perth (a cosmopolitan, western seaboard city on the banks of a wide, clean, blue river) in May (a Mediterranean climate). It had been about ten years since Western Australia had last hosted the National conference, partly due to the perceived convenience and cost efficiency of having it more centrally located. Planning for the conference began about two years earlier as we explored the needs and desires of members and worked hard to make it attractive enough for interstate members and interested practitioners and researchers from New Zealand (our neighbor and frequent partner) to travel West, especially in times of global recession. Although Australia is still managing the international global



Lynn Priddis had the possibility to meet personally with Oscar -winner Shaun Tan.

financial situation relatively well, and Western Australia with its rich mining assets is perceived to be one of the richer states, those of us in the service professions feel clearly the effects of a two-speed economy. We were very nervous as to whether participants would be supported financially with the costs in flying to Perth and the necessary leave from work to attend. By the final stages of conference planning, with major sponsorship support from the Government of WA, especially our newly created Western Australian Mental Health Commission and from the Princess Margaret Children's Hospital Foundation as well as local exhibitors and advertisers and with registrations coming in steadily we were assured of solvency.

The conference attracted 430 participants from Australia and New Zealand across all allied health professions from the government, non-government and private sectors. It clearly appealed to clinicians, academics, researchers and policy makers in infant, child and adolescent mental health.

Highlights of the conference included:

Two exciting training based preconference workshops:

- The attachment-focused AMBIANCE coding system developed in Dr Lyons-Ruth's lab which classifies atypical

parent-infant interaction.

- The use of the Parent Development Interview (PDI) developed by Arietta Slade and represented at the conference by Michelle Slead from the Anna Freud Centre

Presentations by Keynote speakers, specifically

- Professor Sir Robin Murray from the Institute of Psychiatry at Maudsley Hospital, Kings College and University of London, kept us all in not only in our seats at the end of a long day but enthralled by his humorous, colloquial and understandable explanations of epigenetics (crudely put it is about mechanisms and influences on the expression of genes) particularly in relation to the development of Schizophrenia.
- A/Professor Karlen Lyons-Ruth from Harvard University wowed our policy makers with her clearly articulated evidence base for intervening early to prevent disorganized attachment styles in early parent-child relationships and later showed us how to recognize these patterns.
- Dr Astrid Berg: Child Psychiatrist from Cape Town and co-convenor of the next WAIMH congress, emotionally

touched everyone with her journey in establishing an IMH service in South Africa.

- Michelle Sleed presented clear evidence on use of the PDI with prison populations and later held a question and answer informal seminar on using the PDI in all sorts of research for a hungry bunch of prospective researchers and clinicians.
- Florian Zepf a newly appointed Professor of Child Psychiatry from Germany was invited to present his study on chemical (serotonin) transmission in children in relation to mood memory and attentional disorders. His presentation connected him with a network of like minded practitioners in Australia and gave him an opportunity to enjoy this combined conference in all its collaborative glory.
- Shaun Tan: Australia's Recent Oscar winner held hundreds of us transfixed with a journey through his picture book "The Red Tree." Long queues for book signing kept Shaun trapped for hours. Shaun in a quiet and understated manner vividly conveyed the experience of depression and loneliness through his art in ways that left us feeling vitally alive and involved and hungry for more of his stories.

The conference closed with a bang with an energetic panel discussion on Infant Rights. Professor Louise Newman from Monash University in Victoria, Australia, spoke passionately about the rights of infant refugees, topical in this 'lucky' country where "border protection" has been seen by some as more important than humanitarian responses to refugees. She was joined by; Mr Jarrod McKenna,

a theologian from Perth who fired this discussion further; A/Professor Campbell Paul from Melbourne University who spoke on infant rights in hospital settings; and Astrid Berg who again highlighted the plights of infants in South Africa. The buzz at the end of the conference was palpable with over 250 registrants still vitally engaged throughout this last session of the conference.

A highlight of organizing this conference was the easy going nature, humility and professional approach of all the conference presenters. Michelle Sleed committed to presenting at the conference whilst pregnant for the first time and carrying twins. This might have been enough to cause many amongst us to change our plans and cancel. Not Michelle. She booked her room complete with two bassinets, and with the support of her husband she made the epic journey to Perth from London (20 hours +) with her young twins. Needless to say once here there were many willing hands to hold them. Somehow Michelle made it all look manageable and even as if her whole family enjoyed the experience. Karlen Lyons Ruth and her co presenter in the AMBIANCE training Elisa Bronfman were accommodating of all requests made of them. Elisa From the president had always planned to leave early after meeting all her commitments but even so managed to fit in an additional welcome talk to staff at our sponsoring hospital. Shaun Tan arrived with his Oscar in a pillow case and delighted the crowd by passing it around and having it stand on the bench as he spoke (See my photo with Shaun). Robin Murray chatted with all finding an endless supply of anecdotes to illustrate the most complex concepts.

There was unanimous feedback from

presenters and participants and organizers that the hot lunches, morning and afternoon snacks were delicious. Providing food is a tradition – those who travel must be nurtured and many a collaboration has been born over an afternoon cup of tea or coffee.

My favourite feedback

Congratulations on a fabulous conference. I can't remember many where I've wanted to be there all day every day.

Is this unique? I've never seen so much good thinking by so many people in so many professions in one place.

I am amidst an SPSS data analysis and noticing that I am staring out the window thinking about you, your team and the wonderful Perth Conference. Thank you for your gift of preparation and all that you put on offer to us as participants – stunningly wonderful conference.

The seeds sown throughout the conference presentations and discussions will continue to enrich the thinking and work of us all

What a fabulous conference. You must be so proud. Can we talk? (Member Parliament)

I've just worked out a research idea, I sat there listening and... I need to talk. This conference is amazing.

Personally I found it one of the most intellectually satisfying conferences that I have been to.

I hope this brief account inspires further initiatives amongst other affiliates who are considering dipping their toes in to convening a conference as a way of nourishing their members and building inspiration and motivation to advocate for the mental health of infants.

References

Warren, B. (2007). A Brief History of the Australian Association of Infant Mental Health Inc. (AAIMHI)



Introducing the debate from left to right: Louise Newman, Astrid Berg, Campbell Paul and Jarrod McKenna.