

## BACKGROUND

The Australian Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital (AWCH) is a voluntary organisation established in 1973. Nationally, members include parents, health professionals and concerned members of the public. AWCH aims to promote public and professional awareness of the non-medical needs of children and their families in hospital and health care settings.

In 1969, a Sydney mother, Joy Chester, spent four days in a large paediatric hospital with her six-year-old son. Whilst the television proudly showed man taking his first step on the moon, below it lonely babies and children cried, rocked or were quietly withdrawn. The contrast between advanced scientific technology and the neglect of the emotional needs of those children spurred Joy Chester into action (Langley, 1986).

Mounting public pressure, together with committees of enquiry, led to the formation of AWCH, which has resulted in momentous changes in policies and practices affecting the psychosocial needs of children and their families within the health care system.

The formation of AWCH followed an international movement towards new concepts of children's health care based on the work of John Bowlby and James Robertson, who recognised the traumatic effects of separation of young children from their parents, and focused attention on the neglect of non-medical needs of hospitalised children (Bowlby, 1953, 1969; Robertson, 1953 & 1958).

In 1956, a British committee had been appointed to investigate '... the arrangements made in hospitals for the welfare of ill children – as distinct from their medical and nursing treatment – and to make suggestions which could be passed on to hospital authorities' (Great Britain, Ministry of Health, 1959, p.1). The resulting report, was – and still is – highly influential in shaping the concepts of a new philosophy in paediatric nursing and health care.

The Association advocates a holistic family-orientated approach to the care of children. This is reflected in the *Recommended Health Care Policy for Children and their families* (refer Appendix A), which was declared the official policy of the NSW Department of Health in 1975 and endorsed by the National Health & Medical Research Council in 1977. This policy has been supplemented with a series of additional recommendations from AWCH on specific topics (Maternity Services, Disabilities and Play).

Since 1975, AWCH has maintained a specialist information and resource library which now functions within the framework of the University of Western Sydney, Nepean. This unique collection includes printed and audio-visual materials on all aspects of psychosocial care.

As part of the Association's commitment to provide information and education to professionals, parents and the community at large, AWCH organises conferences and seminars, provides speakers for professional or community groups, disseminates health education resources through the AWCH Library, conducts a telephone advisory

service, and publishes a quarterly journal *Children in Hospital*. Recent AWCH National Headquarters and State Branch projects include the establishment and support of a Visiting Granny Scheme; the development of a National Paediatric Support Groups Database; the production of a video on the psychosocial needs of children in hospital and a hospital familiarisation programme.