

## Executive Summary

General awareness of the need for the psychosocial care of children and young people in hospital has developed greatly over the past 30 years. However, existing deficiencies and the prospect of further financial constraints in the future demand that we remain vigilant in protecting the gains already made and ensure continuing progress. It is vital that we closely follow the quality of care provided to children and young people in hospital, particularly in the area of psychosocial care, which is often highly vulnerable to cost saving measures.

The Association for the Welfare of Child Health (AWCH) has been monitoring and advocating for the care of children and young people in Australian hospitals since 1973. The research and clinical literature on the impact of hospitalisation on children's psychosocial health and family functioning strongly support the continued implementation of programs and policies espousing family-oriented, and developmentally and psychosocially appropriate, paediatric health care. The *AWCH Health Care Policy Relating to Children and Their Families* (see Appendix B) represents a synthesis of the practices and programs shown to be effective in assisting children and families coping with the hospital experience. The policy's recommendations are aimed at achieving best-practice in the field of paediatric health care.

In 1992, AWCH conducted a national survey on the psychosocial care of children and their families in hospital. The survey was repeated in 2004, in partnership with the University of Western Sydney (UWS), using the same research instrument (a questionnaire). Fund AWCH, the fund-raising arm of AWCH, financed the study. In late 2003, a project officer was appointed to the survey through the Research Internship Program at UWS, and work commenced in early 2004. The questionnaire went to 465 Australian hospitals caring for paediatric patients. Of the 239 hospitals responding to the survey, 18 were unsuitable facilities for this survey, and a further 24 did not meet the criteria for inclusion. This report represents an analysis of responses from 197 hospitals across Australia.

The *AWCH 2005 National Survey Report on the Psychosocial Care of Children and Their Families in Hospital* outlines the facilities and services currently operating in Australian hospitals that have significance for the quality of care for children, young people and their families. The survey findings demonstrate certain areas of improvement, while in other areas there were either no changes or trends have been negative. Continued low levels of investment in professional development, together with limited institutional capacity and inadequate resources have impacted adversely on the availability and quality of psychosocial-related services in hospitals. As well, the dramatic decrease in the number of special units for child patients and the commensurate increase in the co-location of children and adults on the same hospital ward are of great concern.

To improve psychosocial awareness and practice, hospitals need to access support from other agencies through strategic partnerships. Improved information-sharing systems are also needed, to facilitate the exchange of good practice strategies and information on the psychosocial care of children and their families. While staff in-service training is a recognised way of improving psychosocial care, a focus on implementing long-term systemic and institutionalised strategies is also required to bring about wider, sustainable change. A higher priority must be given to the provision of dedicated funding to address the areas of deficiency highlighted in this report, and a commitment to ensuring that best practice policies, guidelines and standards are implemented. AWCH is seeking the collaborative development of national accreditation standards for the psychosocial care of children and young people in hospitals as a matter of urgency.