



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Reference: Aspects of family services

CANBERRA

Thursday, 30 October 1998

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

Members

Mr Andrews (Chairman)

Mrs Elizabeth Grace
Mr McClelland

Mr Randall

Matter referred to the committee for inquiry into and report on:

the range of community views on the factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown;

those categories of individuals most likely to benefit from programs aimed at preventing marriage and relationship breakdown;

the most effective strategies to address the needs of identified target groups; and

the role of governments in the provisions of these services.

WITNESSES

**BROWNE, Dr Margaret, First Assistant Secretary, Legal Aid and Family Services,
Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit,
Barton, Australian Capital Territory 2600 872**

**HAMBLING, Ms Helen, Assistant Secretary, Family Services Branch, Legal Aid and Family
Services, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Robert Garran Offices,
National Circuit, Barton, Australian Capital Territory 2600 872**

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AFFAIRS

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Present

Mr Andrews (Chair)

Mrs Elizabeth Grace

Mr Randall

Mr McClelland

The committee met at 10.47 a.m.

Mr Andrews took the chair.

BROWNE, Dr Margaret, First Assistant Secretary, Legal Aid and Family Services, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, Barton, Australian Capital Territory 2600

HAMBLING, Ms Helen, Assistant Secretary, Family Services Branch, Legal Aid and Family Services, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit, Barton, Australian Capital Territory 2600

CHAIR—I open this public hearing of the committee's inquiry into aspects of family services. May I welcome Dr Browne and Ms Hambling from the Attorney-General's Department. The subject of this inquiry is the range of views on the causes of marriage and relationship breakdown and how it can be addressed.

Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that the hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament.

This is the second occasion on which we have had the opportunity of having some discussion, and since the first occasion we have received your submission and also further documentation, including answers to questions that were raised by various members of the committee on the first occasion. Without going through the submission in detail, because we obviously can read that, one thing that I wanted to take up this morning was the FAMQIS project. Whilst I have some awareness of it, I am sure my colleagues on the committee may not have the same. Could you provide us some overview of that, the rationale for it and where you see it going? But, firstly, what it is might be useful for the committee.

Dr Browne—I had actually prepared some introductory remarks which included some comments on FAMQIS. We were also going to talk about the research projects that are currently under way in the program, and also about progress with implementing the new funding under marriage education. Do you wish me to do that?

CHAIR—That is fine. If it is going to cover some of the things we are looking at, that is fine.

Dr Browne—Yes, it certainly is, and we can answer further questions after that if you wish.

CHAIR—Yes, go ahead.

Dr Browne—Thank you. As you would be well aware, it is almost a year since we were last here to present the Attorney-General's Department submission to the inquiry. At that time, as you are aware, we provided largely historical background and a general overview of the program.

Just to recap very quickly, the program involves about \$33 million annually. This is provided through the department to community based organisations which provide services in family and relationship counselling, marriage and relationship education, family and child mediation, adolescent mediation and family therapy, family skills training, and children's contact services. Marriage celebrants are also authorised under

the program.

In the last 12 months there has been a lot of activity within the program, particularly the quality and information system project that we call FAMQIS. Today I will give you a brief summary of progress on that and, as I have indicated, we will also talk about the research projects we have been undertaking and the implementation of the funding initiative under marriage and relationship education.

First of all, I will talk about FAMQIS. To identify appropriate consultants to conduct this major quality and information project for the department, a full public tender process commenced in September 1996. Twenty-five consultants lodged expressions of interest, of which five were invited to make a full submission. The preferred tenderer, Community Link Australia, with its project partner, Softlaw Corporation, entered into contract with the department on 12 March 1997.

The project comprises three stages: program development; a quality assurance strategy; and a family services information system, which we are calling FAMnet. It is being conducted in a highly collaborative way with the service organisations and with their peak bodies. A first round of consultations relating to the program development phase of the project occurred across Australia in May and June 1997; there were consultations held in every capital city, some using telephone link-ups with rural service providers.

The outcomes of these consultations were considered by a national forum of service providers in July 1997. Recommendations from the forum were subsequently presented to the Attorney-General and approved by him in August 1997.

In all, 44 recommendations were approved, the most significant including the development of a single program logic statement, the development of client benefit statements for each service activity type, moves towards a single funding program, a change in administration from a grants to a contract model, and a change in name from the 'family services program' to the 'family relationship services program'. The change of name was felt to be significant in terms of putting an emphasis on the particular types of services that are provided under the program, and to avoid confusion which sometimes arises from the fact that there is a family services component to the Department of Health and Family Services.

The changes to the configuration of the program better reflect service activities and increase flexibility to meet client need. A copy of the final report of the program development stage is available, and I have it here. We thought we would table that for your interest.

The statement of purpose for the program—as agreed by the Attorney-General, service providers and the department—is that 'family relationship services contribute to the development of an Australia in which children, young people and adults, in all their diversity, are enabled to develop and sustain safe, supportive and nurturing family relationships, and the emotional, social and economic costs associated with disruption to family relationships are minimised'.

A single program structure provides a more holistic view of family relationship services. It helps identify the commonalities between the service types, and encourages a greater emphasis on responding to client needs rather than fitting clients into the separate subprograms—which, in any event, had developed

somewhat haphazardly over quite a period of time.

There was general support from service providers for a move away from the grants model towards funding contracts. This will provide a more flexible range of funding transactions, enabling organisations to be funded on the basis of target group and geographical area, service activity and/or client benefits. It will also enable services to move to more integrated models of service provision and, in so doing, enhance the focus on the needs of the client.

A second round of consultations relating to the quality component of FAMQIS has just been finalised. A forum of selected representatives will be held in November to make recommendations on the proposed quality strategy for the family relationship services program. The standards which will be developed will assist in ensuring a nationally consistent approach to service delivery, and will demonstrate a level of quality service delivery which meets clients' needs. The standards will also provide a basis for the Attorney-General's decisions on applications for approval under the Family Law Act and the Marriage Act, and funding for the family relationship services program.

The information system, FAMnet, which is the third component of FAMQIS, will be an Internet browser hosted database system. A prototype of FAMnet has been demonstrated across Australia in the course of the consultations. Feedback has been sought from service providers on the design of the system, on proposed data items to be collected and on report generation. Work on further development and design of the system is in progress, and FAMnet will be piloted at 10 sites across the country from February to May 1998.

Apart from collecting demand, supply and performance data, FAMnet will also support the provider accreditation process and financial administration. The data collected by FAMnet will be nationally consistent, and it will be compatible with other major collections by bodies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; it will be critical, of course, for activities like needs based planning. The development project is expected to be completed in June 1998, at which time a rollout plan will be developed for full implementation of all the project outcomes.

The result of this project will be an ongoing and cost neutral system for ensuring quality across the whole of the family relationship services program. Organisations and individuals will then be able to voluntarily seek external recognition of their quality status at a level which meets their individual needs. The rollout plan for the quality and information system will include advice on resourcing and implementation of all aspects of the project. This is expected to be achieved within the current whole of program allocation.

I will move on now to the marriage and relationship education funding and the new initiatives that have been developed. You would recall that the 1996-97 budget provided \$6.1 million over three years to increase marriage and relationship education services to the community. This money, indexed annually, brings total expenditure on these services to \$11.85 million over three years.

The new money has been allocated across four strategies which involve: firstly, 34 new services, which were implemented from 1 January 1997 in high need areas; secondly, best practice initiatives, which will be informed by the findings of the evaluation of the marriage and relationship education subprogram; thirdly, a distance education pilot scheme, following outcomes of the distance education project; and, finally,

a two-stage community awareness strategy.

The additional 34 services were funded from 1 January and formally launched by the Attorney-General on 14 April 1997. New services were established in 10 metropolitan, 12 regional and 12 rural high need areas. Areas to receive new funds were determined using a needs based planning process. This took into account the estimated target population, the locations and levels of existing service delivery, and the particular needs of regional and rural areas. Again, we went through an open competitive process, which drew 171 applications which were assessed against specific criteria. Funding for this initiative is \$1.2 million per annum until 1998-99.

Regarding the best practice initiatives, we have a couple of things developing in this area. Firstly, there are a number of pilot projects to support indigenous family relationships. With these projects we are trying to improve family relationships and break cycles of existing dysfunctional family relationships. Twenty-five submissions have been received from community based organisations, and they currently are being assessed. There will be up to \$250,000 available per annum for the next two years for those pilot projects.

We are also developing a number of pilot projects to focus upon appropriate educational approaches involving the early identification of risk and prevention of domestic violence in relationships involving young women. Again, up to \$150,000 per annum will be available over the next two years for those pilots.

Further best practice initiatives will be developed following the finalisation of the evaluation of marriage and relationship education, which I will come to in a moment. The distance education project is exploring options for innovative and effective service delivery for marriage and relationship education, and is developing prototypes for couples living in rural and remote areas. A draft report on research findings and options for prototype development has been received by the department. Once this has been accepted by the steering committee, the consultants will develop prototypes, field test them and implement a pilot project which will then be evaluated. Implementation of the pilot will commence in 1998.

Finally, the community awareness project was approved by the ministerial committee on government communications on 16 May as a two-stage project. Donovan Research has been contracted by LAFS to conduct the first stage of the project, which will research community values, perceptions and attitudes to marriage and relationship education, including identification of barriers to people accessing services. The research is expected to be completed by December this year.

The second stage of the project will address issues arising from the research and will develop strategies and materials to increase community participation in these services. This stage is due for completion by June 1998. Let me turn to the evaluation of marriage and relationship education. In January 1997 the department contracted Keys Young to undertake an evaluation of the marriage and relationship education subprogram. The evaluation terms of reference required that the evaluation advise on mechanisms to improve accountability and service provision, to identify best practice models and to recommend strategies for future development.

A key component of the evaluation is the qualitative research which will be undertaken to inform the

evaluation on the nature and stages of relationships. The methodologies used for the evaluation were, firstly, a literature review; secondly, key informant interviews; thirdly, eight focus groups involving 78 participants; and, fourthly, a retrospective postal survey of past participants involving 20 organisations and 1,200 participants who were asked to complete and return a postal survey. Of those 1,200 participants, 28 respondents were followed up with a telephone interview. The fifth methodology was a profile of current services to determine effectiveness in meeting client needs.

We had hoped the evaluation would be completed by now. However, it has taken longer than we expected. The steering committee, which includes the department, service providers and experts from the relationship education field, has been providing comment to the consultants, mainly relating to the presentation of the material in the report so that it can be easily read and be a document which is useful for a wide range of audience.

We hope the steering committee will agree on a final draft in the next few weeks, and the report will be referred to the Attorney by the end of November for agreement to release. In the meantime, the Attorney's office has agreed that it would be appropriate for us to provide the committee with a general indication of the nature of the consultant's findings. I should emphasise that these are findings which have been presented to the committee verbally by the consultants at this stage.

I will give a summary of some of the key findings which are emerging. Firstly, there is a very wide acceptance of the concept and ideology of marriage and relationship education. There is a high level of satisfaction by participants. Marriage and the ideal of long-term commitment is highly valued in society. Equally, there is widespread concern about the extent of relationship breakdown. It has also been found that there is an enormous diversity in programs along lines of intervention, structures of programs and complexity of issues covered. So we have by no means a homogeneous field.

There is a high predominance of pre-marriage education programs, but the consultants found that the situation is changing. There is an increasing trend to meeting the needs of older couples and cohabiting couples. A paid professional field is developing, and there appears to be significant underreporting of remarriage participants.

The consultants also reflected that there is a lack of open and critical debate in the field and that there is a great variance in the ways in which data is collected by agencies. This has caused them great difficulties in determining the cost effectiveness of services as required by the brief. There is a lack of knowledge and expertise of educators concerning domestic violence issues. The key topics for marriage and relationship education courses which are sought by participants include conflict resolution—which is interesting in terms of the comments about lack of expertise on domestic violence issues—communication and courses on gender for individuals.

With programs for remarriage and second marriage couples there is a major gap in service provision. I guess that correlates with the finding that the predominance of the courses is in pre-marriage education. Programs for remarriage and second marriage are in great demand and people are highly motivated to participate. This has some importance in that research indicates that this group is a high-risk group in terms of marital relationship breakdown. The final report of the evaluation will develop those themes more fully

and we will provide that to the committee as soon as it is released by the Attorney.

Finally, I wanted to make a couple of comments about the civil celebrants program. You would be interested to know that a discussion paper on the civil marriage celebrants program will be released by the Attorney in the near future. The paper will canvass a number of policy and practice issues that have been simmering over the last few years and is in itself the result of a limited consultation process with some of the stakeholders in the program.

One of the issues that is addressed in the paper—and which is significant for this inquiry—is the role that celebrants can play in informing couples about family relationship services available in the community. Again, we would be very happy to make that paper available to the committee when it is released by the Attorney. That is all I wanted to say by way of introductory remarks.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Dr Browne. Can I just take up a few matters? You said that the recommendations of the consultations were approved by the Attorney—and this is FAMQIS—in August 1997. Can we obtain a copy of those recommendations?

Dr Browne—I think they are reflected totally accurately in that document.

Ms Hambling—That document that has just been tabled includes all of the decisions.

Dr Browne—He accepted all the recommendations. There is no gap.

CHAIR—I understand that, but is there a list of recommendations that is easily followed?

Ms Hambling—There is a previous document to this. It is very similar, but it sets it out in a recommendation form. We would be happy to provide you with a copy of that.

CHAIR—Is that the response paper, the resource document or another one?

Ms Hambling—No, there are many volumes in this consultation. The document you have is a summary. There is a document that is fuller which has all the recommendations.

CHAIR—Could we have that one, too? I think it would be easier to follow.

Ms Hambling—Yes.

CHAIR—I glanced through that. I am not reflecting on the document, but I did not find it easy to follow for my purposes.

Dr Browne—It does have some fuller discussion of what the consultations recommended, so it would be useful in that sense.

CHAIR—In terms of the development of FAMnet, I am still not quite sure what FAMnet is expected

to do or what is the objective of it. There have certainly been suggestions made that the previous—and perhaps current—process of accountability is twofold. One is through the returns which are made by agencies on a regular basis to the department, which is largely the question of financial accountability, although there are some performance indicators in that as well. The other part of that was the monitoring visits to agencies—which we do not need to go into—which seem to have fallen into disrepair for a variety of reasons.

I take it that the development of FAMQIS is to overcome those sorts of difficulties and have a system which provides accountability at different levels. But I am not quite sure, if that is the objective, how FAMnet is going to do that. For example, you said it will demand supply and performance data. Is it the objective that agencies will from time to time or on an ongoing basis enter this data onto FAMnet so that it is available to the department? What else is involved?

Dr Browne—I will just answer that in a preliminary way and then Ms Hambling can talk in greater detail. The system will provide both statistical information and financial information. The financial information that we have been getting has been coming into the department on a six-monthly basis. The statistical information has been quite unsatisfactory from the point of view of doing any proper analysis of the program, in that it is aggregate data only and not unit data. So you are unable to do any sophisticated analysis at all. You cannot do any cross-tabulation and it varies between the so-called subprograms. So we have no consistent set of data for the whole program.

The collection of the information will help us to monitor performance outcomes in that sense. But it will not in itself pick up the more qualitative aspects of monitoring which were undertaken by the monitoring team previously. The development of standards will rather address that aspect. In terms of the practicalities of it, yes, the information will be entered by agencies.

The idea is that it will be a user friendly system that will actually be useful for them to manage their information in terms of managing their own agencies as well as provide what the department needs. So there is quite an emphasis on designing a system which is useful for the organisations and for the department. We are not about just imposing something that suits the department.

Ms Hambling—I do not think there is much to add to that, except that we have gone to great lengths to make sure that the system is useful to organisations and it includes a personalising function so that if there is extra data that organisations are collecting to provide to other funding bodies or for other internal uses, this system will actually provide them with a very powerful reporting tool as far as that is concerned. That would be information that would not be accessible to the department, but it is just an extra component to the system to make it more useful to organisations.

CHAIR—I take it that each agency will have in effect a computer program on their own system?

Ms Hambling—It is an Internet based system. Excuse me if I am not very technical about this, because it is certainly not my area of expertise. One of the advantages of this system is that we do not distribute software, so that we do not require every organisation to be using the same platform. The program sits on a central server.

CHAIR—And they download it.

Ms Hambling—Yes. In fact, they operate on-line. They can download reports and that is one of the other advantages of this system. For a long time in this program, we have collected a lot of information and not a lot of it has actually gone back to organisations to be able to see what is going on nationally or where they might fit in national terms. This will give organisations fairly immediate—within about two months—access to all of the information in aggregate form that has been collected. It is an on-line system that requires them to enter data on each case, or in a unit record form, and it is an easy facility to run reports off all that information.

CHAIR—You just said ‘on each case’. With marriage and relationship education, will that be an entry in relation to each individual who does a program or an inventory?

Ms Hambling—It could be or it could be based around the courses that are offered, but we are looking for client information. That is the advantage of this system. So if 10 people are doing a course then we would be seeking information on the 10 people in terms of their demographics and so on.

CHAIR—That raises resource questions, does it not, for the agencies? If someone has to sit down in front of a computer terminal and enter whether it is counselling, education, family skills or whatever, family skills could involve a larger family configuration. What consideration has been given to the resourcing of this in terms of the agencies?

Ms Hambling—Resourcing has been a key question that we have been discussing at the consultations. Most of the information that will be collected through FAMnet is the same information that organisations are collecting now on clients. In many ways it is standardising the sorts of information that they might have been collecting. Even though you are doing group work, in many instances it is still important to get some of that background information about clients. It does not all have to happen on line. There will be a facility for the screens to be printed out as forms, which it will be possible to fill in at appropriate moments when practitioners are seeing clients and to then enter in a batch form into the system.

CHAIR—You made mention, Dr Browne, of a prototype which has been displayed. Is it possible for the committee to view the prototype?

Dr Browne—I do not see why not.

Ms Hambling—It certainly is. It is actually available through our web site, if you are able to access it there.

CHAIR—What is your web site? You can supply it later.

Ms Hambling—I will.

CHAIR—I have to chair the House in a few minutes so I want to cover a couple of things before I hand over. In relation to community awareness, you referred to Donovan Research. Is that the same Donovan

Research that carried out some research a couple of years ago for the marriage education associations in Western Australia?

Dr Browne—I am not sure about that. I suspect it might be. We could check that out.

Ms Hambling—It is certainly a Western Australian company, so it sounds like it might be.

Dr Browne—It is highly likely.

CHAIR—Do you expect that first round of the community awareness research to be completed by December?

Dr Browne—Yes.

CHAIR—Could we obtain a copy of that? It is directly relevant to some of our terms of reference.

Dr Browne—Again, that is subject to clearance by the Attorney, but we will certainly do that as quickly as we are able.

CHAIR—In terms of the key findings which you outlined from the evaluation, it struck me that there was nothing very surprising in them. Is that your assessment of that?

Dr Browne—That was very much my reaction.

CHAIR—If I had had to sit down and write down a few things, I might not have got the whole list but I probably would have got 70 to 80 per cent of it just off the top of my head.

Dr Browne—I agree with that entirely. What an objective evaluation process does is to put some substance behind what you are picking up anecdotally and what your antennae are telling you. There will be some hard data there that we can do something with, but I agree with you, it is not—

CHAIR—To what extent is the evaluation going to look at the differences? You said there was a whole diverse range of programs and approaches, including programs ranging from individual couple work with inventories through to groups of various sizes working for various lengths of time—some are done on one day, some on a series of evenings and some last for a number of weeks. To what extent is the evaluation attempting to try to ascertain the effectiveness of those approaches?

Ms Hambling—That is an area where the evaluation is having great difficulty. Perhaps the problem is the lack of articulation of the objectives of those kinds of interventions or processes. The early indications are that we will not be able to get very much useful information about actual outcomes from those processes, although we are getting a clearer picture of the diversity of approaches. But it is certainly emphasising for us the fact that we need to provide a framework, if you like, for evaluating effectiveness. The thinking behind the FAMQIS project is very much that we have to be clear about what it is that the programs are trying to achieve in terms of client benefits. It is only when you are clear on what you are trying to address that you

can determine whether it has been addressed. So that is one of the messages that is coming through pretty clearly in the evaluation.

CHAIR—It seems to me that there is a real paucity of research in this country on the effectiveness of programs and on the outcomes of different approaches. Whilst some general research was done at the University of South Australia a few years ago, which was valuable—although in a sense it produced the same sorts of results you have indicated from this current evaluation, and probably one would not have expected much different—in terms of any in-depth evaluation of particular approaches, there is virtually none being undertaken in Australia. Is that a fair comment?

Ms Hambling—Yes, that is a fair comment and that comes through in the findings.

CHAIR—I do not want to seek an indication of what might be a final recommendation, but presumably that is a matter of concern to the department?

Dr Browne—It is, and I think it would be true to say not only that the project has revealed what we rather suspected but that the work we are doing on FAMnet will in itself provide a better basis to evaluate things properly in the future.

CHAIR—Will it provide a better basis to evaluate or a better basis to allow researchers to actually do research? I am drawing a distinction between evaluation and research here. Tell me if I am wrong, but my perception is that evaluation at the level of the Keys Young approach is not the same as the in-depth research that might be done by university or other researchers who are able to work over an extended period of, say, four or five years and to use some of this material. That sort of work is now being done by some researchers in America but does not seem to be being done here.

Dr Browne—That is a very valid distinction and both of those things need to be done. The point I was making was that, with the clearer program logic that has been articulated as a result of FAMQIS, we are in a better position to say, ‘This is what this program is trying to do. These are the clients we are trying to serve. These are the outcomes we are looking for.’ As a separate exercise, I agree that there is a need to stimulate some intensive and, probably, longitudinal research into various aspects of the program. I agree with you entirely.

CHAIR—In terms of what you were talking about earlier about trying in a sense to integrate the programs so that they are not distinct subprograms as such, how do you do that while still saying, ‘This is a program which is primarily about counselling’, or ‘This is a program which is primarily about education’? Are there distinctions between what might be preventative in its nature and what might be dealing with problems which have arisen? Secondly, in the case of some programs, how do you then relate that to the legislative basis for the funding in the first place? For example, counselling funding and relationship education funding rely specifically on provisions in legislation, whereas some of the other programs, as I understand it, exist as a result of administrative arrangements rather than legislative arrangements? Will there still be funding that goes to programs for what we have described in the subprogram terms? What is your view about that?

Ms Hambling—There is no intention of having a free-for-all, in the sense of blending all the money and saying, ‘Go to it and meet your clients needs.’ The way we will proceed is to do it through contractual negotiations. By articulating the program as a single program rather than a set of subprograms but with different service activities, we are laying the groundwork to be able to go to each organisation when we renew the agreements—which will be happening in 1998-99—to negotiate what sorts of client outcomes the organisation would be looking for and what kinds of service activities they may be using in order to bring about those client outcomes or benefits.

We assume that we will have quite different contracts with different organisations that may target specific groups or specific kinds of interventions or geographic areas or whatever. So it will be quite specific and rigorous, but there will be much more flexibility—from the organisation’s perspective—in talking to the department about what it wants to do in its area.

If, for example, we are looking at a service that has for a long time done a lot of very good preventative work and has a bucket of money for marriage education and a bucket of money for family skills training, we may have a negotiation with them that does not specifically say, ‘This is your education stuff, this is your family skills training’, but rather says, ‘These are the sorts of target groups we are going for. We are looking at very primary prevention or secondary prevention work.’ The organisation might then say, ‘We would like to have a group for couples. We would like to have a group for people who have just experienced a separation and, as part of that, we might like to have a children’s group that would normally have come under our family skills training, or something like that.’

Instead of what was a fairly rigid approach—‘A family skills training course is like this’, or ‘A marriage education course is like that’—it enables them to package up those sort of modules.

CHAIR—I understand the links there, but let me take another example of two current subprograms. Marriage education or family skills are, at least, I presume, in theory, preventive programs, compared to something like marriage counselling, which might have some preventive aspects but, I suspect—as has been generally acknowledged—tends to be dealing with resolving problems that have arisen so is less preventive, or even mediation, which whilst it may in theory have started off as family mediation, tends to be largely divorce mediation, if I can put it that way.

Ms Hambling—Yes.

CHAIR—There you have got programs which, on one hand, might be preventive versus those—I have not quite found the word to describe them—aimed at more harmonious separation, if I can put it that way. That would be more difficult, I presume, to integrate in the way you are speaking about.

Ms Hambling—Not necessarily, in the sense that that would be part of the suite of approaches that that organisation has. Certainly, from a national perspective we will be monitoring to make sure that we do not suddenly veer all of the service delivery down one end or towards another end. We would still have government objectives to meet in that sense, but rather we would be negotiating specifically with the organisation, who might say, ‘We have clients who come to us for counselling but we really think that, if we established a group in a more educative kind of framework, that would be quite useful. Whilst we have

always just had counselling, we really think it would be valuable for us to be able to do some of this more preventive work at the same time. We ought to be able to do that.'

It is quite a challenge for us. We have never negotiated as we will be on such a particular basis with organisations, but we are hopeful that it will be a good outcome.

CHAIR—I have to go. I will just ask two final questions before I hand over to the deputy chairman. A problem I see with that approach is that there is always going to be a tendency to do what is most urgent in terms of funding. What is most urgent is going to be those who turn up with an immediate problem. There is going to be a bias, I would have thought—I do not think that is an unfair statement—towards dealing with the problem urgent cases you have got, which means the bias is going to be away from prevention. I will leave this as a comment; you do not have to answer. It seems to me that, if that is the case, there needs to be some way to check or correct that bias.

Can I just place one question on notice because I have to run? On page 10 of your submission of 13 December, which was the answer to some questions which had been asked, there is a table under the heading 'Percentage of need being met by the family services program'. I simply do not understand that table. I cannot relate the percentage figure that you get to any of the other figures there. I would appreciate being able to understand that. What flows from that is: have you been able to measure over, say, a number of years increases or changes in the number of clients in the various programs?

Flowing from that, finally, do you have an objective or an aspiration, if I could perhaps put it more generally, about where this should be going? To take one program, if 21.1 per cent of the need is met—I am not sure what that means; let me just take a hypothetical. If 20 per cent of couples are doing marriage education, is there an objective that says that in a decade's time we would like to have an aspiration—I will put it more generally than an objective—that that should be 50 per cent, 80 per cent or 100 per cent? If so, how does what you are describing in terms of FAMQIS and these things lead us towards that objective or is there a different objective that you have in mind? I am sorry, I have to go elsewhere.

Resolved (on motion by Mr McClelland):

That a subcommittee comprising Mr McClelland and Mrs Elizabeth Grace be established.

Dr Browne—Can I just make one very quick response to your first comment. I think that is a very good and apt comment about the balance between preventive and, if you like, more interventionist programs. I do not think it is impossible at all for the department and the government to put a value on particular types of programs and to say, 'We put a value on preventive programs and we want a certain proportion of the program to concentrate on that.' I do not think that it is beyond us to do that.

CHAIR—The only other thing I will say, before handing over to Mr McClelland, is that obviously when you get some of this further material such as the Donovan first stage report and the evaluation you are doing, we would obviously like the opportunity of discussing that with you. It does not make much sense for us to report when these examinations are going on and not take that into account.

Dr Browne—We would be very happy to discuss those with you.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr McClelland)—I have only one question. You have commented, and I agree with the approach, on where you are going in the sense that there is a tremendous diversity in the services that are being offered. It is also appropriate to ensure that, if these programs are going to be funded, they are genuine and thought through in terms of outcomes. I suppose the time will come where they have been up and running—granted they have been up and running in an informal or private capacity now for some time—under a supervised or goal oriented structure. The time will come when there should be a meeting of minds, I suppose—I am normally against talkfest—where the relevant people involved get together to talk through what has worked effectively. Would you see that as being desirable; if so, when would be the time to get together as a

conference of counselling-education centres?

Ms Hambling—When FAMnet is actually operating, we will start to build up a much better databank of performance information. A lot of it will be the assessment of the professionals in the field: the extent to which they are able to meet client needs. I expect that in about two or three years we will have a much clearer picture about the extent to which services are meeting what we have been able to develop collaboratively with the field are agreed objectives, if you like, for client outcomes. I would say that in two or three years we will be at a point where it would be very important to have a look at the approaches in the context of that objective information—not that it will ever be totally objective.

I do not think we would want to wait two or three years to address some of the issues that are arising. I think that, probably as a result of the marriage and relationship education evaluation, some of those preliminary findings are telling us that there is a need for a greater exchange at a professional debate level. I think we would be looking at organising something like that in the fairly near future.

ACTING CHAIR—And it is certainly an appropriate area for funding, you would think, for that to occur.

Ms Hambling—As a preliminary assessment, yes.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I asked the department to provide the committee with the figures for Aboriginal people and families. In submission No. 159, you have given us a table that is full of percentages. What are these percentages of? Are they of the general population? Are they of the indigenous population? Or are they of the married couples that make up the present population? Where would those percentages have been drawn from?

Ms Hambling—Excuse us while we have a look at the table.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Maybe I could put that one on notice. All those percentages mean absolutely nothing unless we know what the base is. Where do you get 0.20 per cent?

Dr Browne—That is a similar question to the one from the Chairman.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Yes, it leads to that. Further on in the submission, in part 3, you said,

in response to my question:

The low incidence rate may be partly due to the fact that most marriage and relationship counselling and family mediation organisations contracted through the Family Services Program are located in metropolitan areas, where relatively few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may reside.

Are any of these new programs that we have put in place, which you say have gone out into rural and regional areas, specifically targeting the indigenous population?

Ms Hambling—Yes. As Dr Browne mentioned, we now have on hand 25 applications for services to particularly address the needs of indigenous families. We hope to have recommendations to the Attorney by the end of the year on those. We would probably want to reassess that statement in that there are obviously large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who live in metropolitan areas.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I have over 300 families in my electorate.

Ms Hambling—Exactly. Under this pilot we would be looking at trialling an arrangement in a metropolitan area as well as in a rural area.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Would you have specific objectives and outcomes that are targeting that particular group?

Ms Hambling—Yes, we have. One of the key aspects of this pilot is that we are exploring a partnership idea. Most of the existing services that are funded under the family relationship services program are professional, longstanding organisations that have not met the needs of the indigenous population in the past. We have asked in this process that organisations that are interested in developing a partnership arrangement with an indigenous organisation put forward applications. We are very mindful of the fact that services that are not specifically designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are not always attractive to those families. So we are trialling an approach whereby we link a professional counselling, educational or mediation service with perhaps a more general indigenous service and try in that way to meet the needs of those clients. So we are hopeful, and we have got some very interesting proposals under that.

A pilot has also been funded on Groote Eylandt up in the Northern Territory as part of the 1996-97 budget initiative on marriage and relationship education. That is specifically looking at how to make the services more appropriate for indigenous families.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I have a very urban electorate. I have over 300 families that have been identified in that indigenous category. They are quite closely interlinked and have very good elder lines, both female and male, that work very closely within the units. If a program is put in place I would like these people to be considered because they are the ones who know the cultural mores and are prepared to do anything to keep the unit together rather than see it dispersed. They are very keen for that. That type of thing should be taken into consideration; that should be something that should be given very serious consideration.

Ms Hambling—Yes.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Further on in your submission, you made a comment about the changeover and visiting services. My only comment about that is that we need more. Is that something that is going to be encouraged and developed, or do we have to put a little pressure on somewhere to make sure that this is seen as a very worthwhile and very sensible program?

Dr Browne—We are certainly getting that sort of feedback from the community. When I was in Adelaide yesterday I was told that the service there is going to extend its hours. It wants to extend into Sunday and it is seeking more funding, et cetera. The immediate response to your question is that, under the new configuration of the program, there will be greater flexibility to address particular needs as we identify them. That will come within the resource allocation that we currently have, but it will provide us with the opportunity to say, ‘In this particular area this seems to be the greatest need. We might want to allocate more of our dollars to that area.’

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—Again, I know of only one service in Brisbane.

Dr Browne—That is correct.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—People have to travel all day just to give their child a two-hour access. The whole day is written off because they have to travel from one end of the city to the other just to get to this one place. I desperately want a service on the other side of Brisbane—Brisbane is divided by a river—so I am pleased to hear that because it is very necessary.

Ms Hambling—It is a very small network of services. It really is a pilot in the sense that there are only 10 or so across the country, but we are learning a great deal about what is needed through that process. This sort of feedback is very useful. The Attorney gets a lot of letters asking for more.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—That service, which I have visited, seems to be doing an excellent job. I would like to see it replicated, so I will be advocating that. Another comment, which is marked No. 17 in your submission, states:

Recent changes to the Family Law Act emphasise family and child mediation as a method of primary dispute resolution in family law disputes . . . It provides the opportunity for more dignified and respectful resolution of disputes associated with marriage and relationship breakdown than generally occurs in a highly adversarial litigation process.

I wrote a small comment in there that the CSA needs to be told this too. We encourage people to make the effort to challenge and get mediation through and to get dispute resolutions completed without conflict and without anger—or we calm the anger down—and then the next thing that happens is that we get a bill from CSA for something that we had absolutely no idea about because the rules over there say one thing but what was resolved over here with mediation was something else. Is there any cross-fertilisation there for that to become more practical?

Ms Hambling—There is, actually. The CSA has expressed a lot of interest in mediation as a possible better approach to some of the issues that their clients are dealing with. In fact, we are talking with them about a pilot that will refer people from the CSA to mediation to try to resolve the whole package of their

issues, not just child support. Once again, that will be a small pilot, but it is a very hopeful indication of the thinking that you get long-term benefits from trying to avoid escalating conflict in an adversarial arrangement at the outset.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It must work out cheaper in the long run.

Ms Hambling—That is what we hope.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It will be interesting to see. Another point in your submission was about when you did some mediation to avoid legal costs. No. 18.5 in your submission states:

Using these costings, the estimated cost for the Family Court litigation pathway was \$902, compared with the estimates of \$884 for Family Court mediation . . .

There is only an \$18 difference. We are not saving a heck of a lot of money. But when you go into private ones, the cost drops dramatically. Is there an explanation for this or is this anecdotal and that is what your pilot is going to prove?

Dr Browne—I suppose there are a couple of comments to make there. One is that, as you have said yourself, there is more of a differential between the cost of the litigation and the costs of the services in the community, on the basis of this study. But the other thing is that, from memory—and you may want to correct me here—I do not think that \$902 included the final stage of litigation. It was only up to the point of the conciliation conference; I just cannot recall. But there is the final stage of the litigation to build on that. So, if you in fact went right through, the differential would be greater.

Ms Hambling—It was reflecting the fact that most people do not go right through to the end, so it tried to draw a point in the judicial process that was not quite through to the end.

Dr Browne—It is something like five per cent that go right through.

ACTING CHAIR—That necessarily implies that the cut-off will be because of the intervention of mediation services. If they were not there the costs would go through to the end. I would imagine very few solicitors would stand up in the Family Court for \$900 a day.

Ms Hambling—It is not necessarily a mediation that pulls people off that litigation pathway; it is one of the areas that we need to learn more about. But the point is taken.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I think that probably needs to be expanded and given a little bit more credibility. The way it is presented there, you would think, why bother? For \$18 why bother? I think that needs to be expanded, not necessarily with a figure but with it being emphasised that that is at the point before you go on to the directional hearings.

Ms Hambling—There are other aspects as well as the cost. What we are looking at is the way the family relationships are affected by the means by which these things are determined. That is something that I

think we need more studies of.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—I agree totally. We need to see the intangible benefits. I know it is very hard to quantify those, but I think we need to take a lot of that into consideration.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you very much for your time. We have gone over time but it has been very productive and useful.

We need an authorisation to authorise the program development final report summary, September 1997. I need a motion from Mrs Grace that the document provided by Dr Browne entitled *Program development final report summary* be accepted as an exhibit and received as evidence in the inquiry.

Mrs ELIZABETH GRACE—It is so moved.

Resolved (on motion by Mrs Elizabeth Grace):

That the committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it as the public hearing today.

Committee adjourned at 11.48 a.m.