

# keeping them safe

By Carole Lander

**When the public hearings and private sessions closed on December 31, 2016, a staggering 2,200 people had reported incidents to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which is investigating where systems have failed to protect children, and making recommendations on how to improve laws, policies and practices to prevent and better respond to child sexual abuse in institutions. It will wrap up at end of this year.**

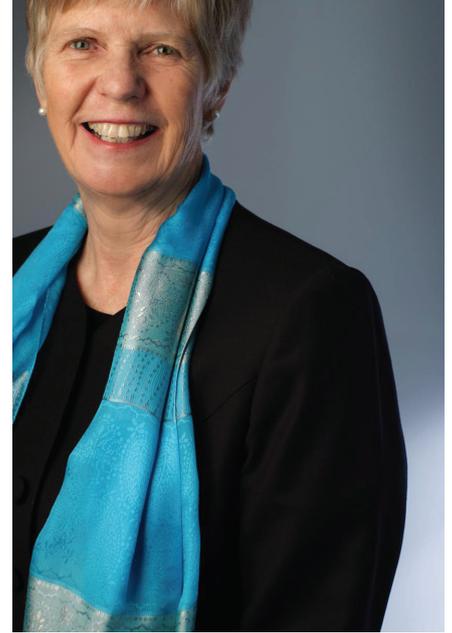
On May 1, Commissioner Justice Coate welcomed a large audience gathered at a Melbourne symposium to hear the findings of research reports published by the Commission. Until now, there has been very little Australian research into this topic.

Professor Gwynnyth Llewellyn (Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney) presented on behalf of children with disability. She is an authority in this area and her work has led to national strategies for change in Australia. Llewellyn reported that there is already some Australian evidence that children with disability are proportionately over-represented in the out-of-home care and education sectors but further work is needed to gather accurate data

and to address their particular circumstances of heightened risk.

The research data that does exist (mostly from overseas) has never relied heavily on the needs as perceived by the children themselves. To redress the balance, for their research, Professor Morag McArthur and Dr Tim Moore from the Australian Catholic University listened to children in residential care where the incidence of sexual abuse is highest. They found that these young people often don't feel supported and want to be more in control of their lives. Opportunities for sexual abuse to happen in residential care are many and varied: it can occur between peers; children may be approached by adults in the centre or by others from outside who prey on their vulnerability. Because these children have no role models to show what a 'normal home life with two parents' is like, they may not recognise abuse as something wrong. "At the end of the day," said Moore, "these kids want to be around adults who care about them."

In one interview, the researchers asked a child what 'residents' needed in order to feel safe. The child replied, "You know, we're just kids". Although this seemed like a throwaway line, this child's reflection is a powerful reminder that those who live in residential care are really just kids who deserve



to be provided with as much of a child-like childhood as possible.

This is a message that Llewellyn drives home in the paper she presents through the Commission. She says, "We should understand that 'children with disability' are 'children' first. The disability doesn't define the lives of children". However, she concedes that their everyday lives are not always like those of other young people because they are often segregated. They might live in an institution or, at school, they might be in a separate classroom from the mainstream students. They live with a higher ratio of adult-to-child for good reasons but this can have its dangers as well. They are more likely to find themselves with opportunistic or unfamiliar adults and in opportunistic settings where sexual abuse can occur.

"We need to remember that they are at heightened risk of sexual abuse," says Llewellyn who recommends targeted strategies to counter this.

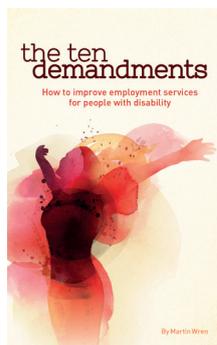
In addition, children with disabilities need to be taught protective behaviours; their families must know what to look out for; and staff in residential care centres need training in how to identify signs of emotional and behavioural change that signal that children are at risk of sexual abuse.

Llewellyn also points to the common misconception that specialists are the only people who can deal with disability. She urges non-specialist teachers to see beyond any impairment and teach 'the child'. Historically, we have relied on specialised medical people and now we have allied health professionals looking out for people with disability. Her fear is that, particularly under the NDIS, they will start to be seen as the ones with the knowledge whereas there are simple things that everyone in the community can do for children with disabilities to keep them safe: "Watch them, notice them, don't turn away from them."

Commissioner Coates outlined ten elements that would make an institution safe for a child. They cover leadership, culture, communication, equity, staff, training and families. The takeaway message from the symposium was loud and clear: much improvement is needed to make things better for children in institutional settings and there is a strong possibility that this royal commission can make it happen.

For more information visit [childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au](http://childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au) 

## books



### the ten demandments

According to the author of *The Ten Demandments* Martin Wren, as many as half the people in receipt of the Disability Support Pension are willing and able to work, but most members of society don't believe they're up to it.

As CEO of one of Australia's most effective disability employment service providers, Nova, Wren argues that successive governments are missing a vital economic opportunity. He says that with effective training and support, over 350,000 people would simultaneously stop drawing benefits and start paying tax. Wren also argues that employment is a vital pathway to achieving an inclusive community and that society is better off when people with significant barriers are supported to become more independent.

In *The Ten Demandments* Wren explains how disability employment services can do better by jobseekers; demonstrates the standard people with disability should expect when seeking an employment service; and demands we improve our intentions to achieve the best results for each job seeker.

[employmentfirst.com/index.php/the-book](http://employmentfirst.com/index.php/the-book)



### the adventures of hydro girl: city of madness

*The Adventures of Hydro Girl* comic aims to combat stigma, disrupt shame, raise awareness, increase empowerment, and advance social change for people with Hydrocephalus - referred to as water on the brain.

Singer, songwriter and co-writer/artist, Sarah Renehan was born with Hydrocephalus. In 2011, after spending a lengthy time in hospital, and enduring another four brain surgeries, Sarah founded The Brain Drain Project, a website that provides support and raises funds for those living with the condition. This experience encouraged Sarah, in collaboration with her brother John, to introduce the world to Hydro Girl. The series features Sam - a young girl with Hydrocephalus, which has given her superpowers. It's up to Sam and her team to fight the villainous Mad Migraine before he destroys Blue Lake City.

[sarahrenehawixsite.com/hydrogirlofficial/store](http://sarahrenehawixsite.com/hydrogirlofficial/store) 