

# Twelfth International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect: 'Protecting Children: Innovation and Inspiration', Auckland, September '98

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The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) was founded in 1977 to prevent child abuse and neglect in every nation in order to "enable the children of the world to develop physically, mentally, and socially in a healthy and normal manner". In its goal to "work toward the alleviation and ultimate prevention of such maltreatment", the Society sponsors Congress meetings every two years as a forum for discussion and sharing of knowledge and experience. ISPCAN's journal - *Child Abuse and Neglect: The International Journal* - provides an interdisciplinary forum on the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect and child sexual abuse.

At the Tenth Congress for Child Abuse and Neglect held in 1994 in Kuala Lumpur, Maori activist and now deceased spokesperson Auntie Eva Ricard and others convinced the Society that the 12th Congress should be held in New Zealand. Efforts were then made by the New Zealand organising committee so that Maori and Pacific issues regarding child maltreatment and sexual abuse were included in the agenda which were reflected in the plenary, concurrent sessions, and poster presentations.

The 12th ISPCAN Congress was held at Auckland's impressive Aotea Center. It was formally opened by the traditional and warm welcome of the formal Maori powhiri conducted by the elders of the Tamaki Makarau Iwi. The Congress process consisted of two plenary sessions a day with nine concurrent sessions which stemmed from six thematic streams: 1) Indigenous peoples, 2) Brain development, traumatic

experiences and memory, 3) Mental health and therapy, 4) Prevention, protection and education, 5) Social work, medicine, and law, and 6) Child advocacy and children's rights. In all there were 10 plenary keynote speakers and 178 presenters during the concurrent sessions. To guide the 1300 registered Congress participants through this maze of topics on child abuse and neglect, the Congress provided a handy 312 page book of presentation abstracts edited by Dr. Ian Hassall, one of the many key Congress organisers from New Zealand. Select ISPCAN 12th Congress abstracts are included in this issue of *Pacific Health Dialog* in the *Abstracts* section.

Of note in the stream on Brain Development, Traumatic Experiences and Memory, were the dynamic presentations by Bruce Perry regarding his research unit's findings on

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children who suffer chronic abuse which destructively impacts the developing child. A number of neuro-physiologic and physical findings were noted that may improve diagnosis and treatment of these children. These findings included "traumatic specific" changes in mean heart rates with girls demonstrating depressed heart rates secondary to dissociative symptoms and

boys showing increases of heart rates related to hyperarousal symptoms.

From the Child Advocacy and Children's Rights stream came a presentation on how to establish a "Multidisciplinary Assessment Center and Family Advocacy" which has become a model for the evaluation and treatment of child sexual abuse victims in the U.S.

Regarding the issue of child abuse and neglect, one of the more impressive plenary presentations was that by Druis Barrett of the National Maori Woman's Welfare League which promotes a national perspective of the tamariki (child) through the strengthening the Whanau (family) to address the future of Maori through care and well-being of tamariki. In her "Kahurangi - Precious Children from a Positive Maori Perspective" regarding family violence and child abuse and neglect among the Maori, she took a stand: "We Maori women are not going to take it any more!"

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There were several presentations which addressed child abuse, neglect, including child sexual abuse in terms of the *Convention of the Rights of the Child* which has been ratified by 191 of 193 countries – including New Zealand and all the Pacific Countries. During the plenary session on “Child Abuse and Neglect in the Pacific”, one keynote panellist referred to the *Convention’s* principle of “First Call” which states that the best resources of a nation must be marshalled to protect and promote the well being of children – in good times and bad. References were then made to the institutionalised governmental neglect in select Pacific countries where women and children, who make up the vast majority of the population, are denied equal access to health care resources (primary and secondary care) because health care funding is plundered on off island tertiary medical referral for a few (mostly males with the politically and culturally elite over-represented). Since men, who are the political leaders of these countries seem to be not up to the challenge of insuring equity and justice for access to health resources for woman and children, the speaker, following Druis Barrett’s lead, looked to the day when Pacific women would get angry and cry: “We Pacific women are not going to take it any more!”

Many women in the audience adamantly responded, “But what are the men going to do about child abuse?”

Other presentations in the Pacific Island Forum section of the Indigenous Peoples stream included the presentation “Colonialism is Alive and Well in Child Protection Practice: A Pacific Island Perspective”. A presentation on anger management demonstrated – “Peaceful Wave” – an innovative hands-on program available to Pacificans in the Auckland community. One of the many poster presentations included “Child Abuse and Pacific People”.

Although the Congress was very organised and very ambitious in providing a broad range of topics, Pacific or otherwise, there was little time afforded, as in most international conferences, for thoughtful discussion of the many issues raised. Several Pacificans did try to gather together between the plenary and concurrent presentations in the foyer to exchange ideas but the time was not enough. However, the 12<sup>th</sup> Congress was an excellent conference and a wonderful international forum for people committed to eliminating child abuse and neglect and child sexual abuse in our not-so-child-friendly world.

For more information about ISPCAN contact Kim Svevo at <kimispcan@aol.com> or visit the Congress web site at <<http://www.nzhealth.co.nz/ispcan98>>.

## References from the ISPCAN 12<sup>th</sup> Congress Abstracts book

See page 392.

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11. Atawaingia Te Harakeke – A Maori Model of Parenting Support and Development. Rokx H, Pitman M, Joe M. Early Childhood Development Unit, Wellington, New Zealand (Page 29)
12. The Dynamics if Risk in Iwi-based Child Protection Practice. Stanley EG, Thomsom R. Children, Young Persons and their Families Service, Christchurch, New Zealand. (Page 31)
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