

Professor Fiona Stanley: Keynote Address on A snapshot of young South Australians June 2013

Transcript

Thank you very much for allowing me to send you a video. I want to start by acknowledging that I'm on Noongar boodja and I acknowledge the spirits of the traditional owners past and present and you've obviously done that where you are in Adelaide.



I'd like to start by saying what a wonderful document this snapshot of young Australians is, and to acknowledge that Di Hetzel has been a champion of getting out the best data that we really have on many of the aspects, particularly the social determinants of child health and wellbeing in Australia. So, Di, well done for what you've done, and Fiona Arney, it's lovely to be speaking for you and with you in your new role and I wish you very well in that position in South Australia.

I love the quote of course 'If you want to improve anything, first measure it', and that's a quote as we know from UNICEF.

You answer in your own document here, why monitor? Why monitor the wellbeing of young South Australians? 'Assessing how well our youngest members are doing can help us set priorities and into the future serve as a guiding rail for keeping our efforts on track, giving early warning of failure or success, and making us accountable for how well they are doing. In short it allows us to celebrate successes and look to areas where further effort may be required.' And you do that very well in this document.

But there are three more major reasons why I believe we need to have such measures. And these relate to the broader societal reasons for measuring children's outcomes. I'm very excited about being part of two projects; one an OECD global project which we are hoping to introduce measures other than GDP to measure and foster the progress of societies, and child wellbeing is right up there high on the list. 'If GDP is what you measure, GDP is what you get,' as Joe Stiglitz, the Noble Laureate economist said to our last OECD meeting, and we know GDP is flawed anyway.

But is it all we want to be in our society; is have a financially competent society? What about child wellbeing? What about inequalities? What about sustainable environments? What about education? What about health? What about reduced carbon footprints and all the things that are really important for the future health and wellbeing of our whole society?

So, the second project I'm involved in is an Australian National Development Index, where we want to measure those things for Australia. The things that we value, like child wellbeing and the care of children. Then those things we know are going to enhance human capability for all people.

So these two projects are another major reason why you need to have very good data on children and young people. Because that is where we're going to get the biggest bang for our buck and try and convince the politicians and bureaucrats that expenditure in those areas are as important as any financial bottom line. So good on you South Australia for doing this snapshot.

Of course you're coming along with the ARACY Report Card, and the other major reason therefore, for producing documents like this is to benchmark Australia against the world's best, to give us something to aspire to. We can't just say, well Australia's wealthy and it's

doing well and and it's got a boom in economic outcomes. But what are we doing in terms of all of the social, the child and youth in the outcome measures and in a way therefore, I don't like to say this, but about shaming our politicians and our policy makers? About shaming our nation to act for children and young people? They so easily slip off the agenda and they must not.

And the third reason I think that we must collect data is that children become adults and the ways that we can nurture the early years from pregnancy and through childhood, and young adulthood. That is the future of this country, and do we not need to have large numbers of adults who are competent and who are going to participate civilly, economically, socially? We need a lot of kids who are going to become great parents, for example.

So, your report has good and bad news and I think that you've summarised that very well in the document. It's terrific to see you're closing the gap at lowering infant mortality in Aboriginal children. That's happening across the board in Australia, but of course we're seeing increases in low birthweight. The one thing that I'm very passionate about; increasing pre-term and low birthweight, in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers. Now, there's a whole lot of reasons that we think are causing that. Increasing multiple births. I think there's a higher fertility of high risk mothers. We're looking at this a lot in WA, but that's a hugely important indicator. One of the most important I think. It's a good social indicator but it's a good indicator of kids who are going to get into trouble later on.

Your immunisation and breastfeeding data are terrific. Substance abuse is going down in young people, which is great, and you're holding the line on overweight and obesity. And decaying teeth. I think this is a real issue for us. I don't know if its bottled water or the fluoridation not having such great effect but the importance of getting good teeth for kids we all know.

Now the bad news is about not having any good data, recent data, on certain outcomes like mental health and asthma and I think that's just something we must keep lobbying for. It's one thing I'm in retirement, is keeping up the lobbying and keeping up the advocacy for more population data. Bringing it together. Linking all of the things we know are important. We must just not let any of this fall of the agenda. We've got great data actually in Australia. We've got to use it. We've got to have up to date data, and mental health is such an important issue.

The child protection data you have is very extensive and, Fiona I'm sure this is in your bailey wick. Some of its good. Some of the indicators are good and some of them are not so good. Hugely important, and we're part of, a now big international collaboration, looking at pathways into and pathways out of child maltreatment. And getting the best indicators. And this work was stimulated by Dorothy Scott, who said, 'Why don't we have a public health approach to child abuse and neglect?' And she's absolutely right. And we're pursuing that with these international collaborative studies we're doing.

The educational data that you have, again it's patchy. Some good and some bad. I'm delighted to see the high proportion of Aboriginal children actually meeting benchmarks, as we always say there's a gap, and there is a gap, but let's look at the positive. Well over 75 percent of Aboriginal children meeting some of those national benchmarks is going to translate into good outcomes for those kids later on.

And I think that we need more data and better measures and we need to have inspirational stories of children who are contributors. I know this is close again to your hearts. I've just run a Festival of Ideas for the University of Melbourne in which we had a whole session on children as contributors. So, ok there's children's rights, but there's a huge benefit from children contributing and you don't have good measures on children as contributors. They

were all negative measures about how many children were being incarcerated, and it's good that that's down or at least steady. But what about the positives? We need to get data on that and I think hearing inspirational stories for children who've overcome significant disadvantage to contribute to our society are just wonderful stories. It doesn't matter if they're just stories rather than total data.

Now, one of the things you asked me to address is about the framework for change. How do we make data influence change? How do we make data influence policy? And I think we have to do things differently as researchers and people who are monitoring the evidence. And that is that we need to involve and engage two, or three important groups of people; the policy makers, the service providers and the consumers, the parents. If we do that, we're going to have, not immediate implementation, of recommendations that come from the data, but a much more seamless way of doing that.

So I think it really is up to us as groups of people who are responsible for the analysis data to engage these people actually right at the beginning. Ask the questions of them. What are your plans? What are your policies? What do you need from the data? What would help you? I mean it's incredibly helpful for a policy maker to know that we're in a baby boom and that they should be providing more educational resources, larger numbers of hospital beds, greater sources of mental health facilities both in community and in hospital. Not less. So that kind of information is incredibly powerful if we can channel it into where it's going to make a difference.

The big other suggestion I have is, that many of the pathways into improved health and wellbeing are multi-factorial. They're not just in health or just in education or just in those silos. So, if you want to improve health and wellbeing you've got to think about public housing, you've got to think about communities and green space. You've got to think about poverty and inequality. So, you've got to think about employment and making things easier in the workplace for those who are caring at home.

I love this kind of joined up thinking and joined up data can lead to joined thinking as we've demonstrated here. Getting across the silo bureaucracies and making things like the National Disability Insurance Scheme a patient focussed, a disability focussed kind of funding is a very big step forward, because it's a multi-factorial thing.

Just because you're disabled you don't not get all the other things that other kids get.

I think we need to think about ways of using our data in more joined up ways and if you get the parents in early on we've shown beautifully in Western Australia that parents can be the best advocates for the use of data and it's translation. It's about whether you really want to use the data for proper prevention and real change or you just want more overwhelmed, expensive and somewhat too late in effective band aids. So the data can be used to prevent problems from occurring, as well as highlight the reasons why you need more services in certain areas and I've already mentioned the baby boom and the need for mental health and disability services.

I think the other recommendation, and this is my final set of recommendations, are that we need champions for children. We need political champions for children, bureaucratic champions for children, and don't forget the media champions for children. I had people from the ABC, the sort of celebrities from the ABC chairing almost every session of the Festival of Ideas in Melbourne, and it was fantastic. They were so good at grasping the data quickly and translating it into sometimes humorous but very telling comments.

I think that a Children's Commissioner is absolutely crucial. They will make a huge difference. Michelle Scott is just stepping down as our Children's Commissioner here in

Western Australia. She's been outstanding. It's a measure of her success, but not a very good comment on our bureaucrats and politicians that she's been fairly un-liked and unappreciated by them. It's because she's been doing her job, and she has been putting data and children and evidence and a voice for children and young people right on the political agenda. And it has upset apple carts and so it b***** should!

So, my last point is about using children themselves as champions for the kind of improvement of outcomes. They are phenomenal voices. Look at this young woman who's just opened United Nations about educating Muslim women. I mean what a powerful voice she is, and there are children who are very capable of speaking and of giving their stories. And it does two things. It's engaging and it makes people think, but also it changes the view of young people of all being pretty hopeless and abusing substances and getting into crime. No, no. The vast majority of kids are terrific and we need to put them up on a pedestal.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to comment on this fantastic report. I hope that your launch goes very well and I look forward to visiting Adelaide soon and meeting up with all of you, and particularly old friends there. But warmest congratulations and thank you.