

and family life. He says: "Something as vague as concern might be tittle-tattle or trivial. That's textured language and open to abuse."

Eileen Munro, reader in social policy at the London School of Economics, agrees the plan is "bedevilled by a lack of clarity". She says: "If everyone working with children records the slightest worry, because they're afraid of getting into trouble if anything happens to the child, then files will quickly get clogged up with minor concerns that, on investigation, are discounted."

Sadiq Khan, of Christian Khan solicitors, calls for proper safeguards about who can access the data, how long it can be stored and how its accuracy can be challenged. He says: "There must be a watchdog to monitor children's records. The police national computer should only be accessed when officers have good reason, but some have been disciplined for selling the information to newspapers." Andrew Christie, director of the Hammersmith and Fulham children's trust in west London, plays down these fears. The creation of children's trusts, which amalgamate social services, education and healthcare, should resolve data protection problems about the transfer of information between different agencies, he claims. "Responsibility for child health - and children's medical records - will be formally delegated to the trust."

His trust, however, does not intend to set up a database as comprehensive as those proposed by ministers. "The government might want to keep a track on every child but that's not our priority," he says. "We're setting up a website that will store basic biographical details on children we know to be at risk of social exclusion. It won't exchange confidential data."

Christie accepts it will be challenging to verify the accuracy of the information stored. Last year, Hammersmith and Fulham council found that 48% of its social services files, covering 55,000 people, did not match up with local NHS records. Nearly 1,450 records disagreed on whether a person was alive or dead.

The disparity arose from flaws in the NHS patient tracing service, which only matched records by surname. In response, the council set up a computer system that checked the full name, age and address of patients at one GP surgery, which achieved a 100% match with social services files in a month. But Christie admits a complete match of all local records will take far longer.

The education secretary, Charles Clarke, is fighting for a bill in the Queen's speech next month that will address the legal and technical problems hindering information sharing. Phil Cain, co-author of the safety nets report, warns that if the legislation fails to remove these barriers IRT will prove a "white elephant". He says: "IRT is the last roll of the dice. It may be a pilot scheme but the government has no alternative plan. So we're stuffed if it doesn't work."

Woomera

Max Liddell
Monash University

Many of us, as we grew up, read Alice's *Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. We probably regarded Alice's story as a 'fairy story' and did not see any other implications. Alice's adventures were further sanitised and minimised by the Walt Disney film version of them. Yet Lewis Carroll's recorded treatment of Alice, viewed through a different lens, can be seen as a manual on the brainwashing and emotional abuse of children.

One wonders whether John Howard has instructed Federal Ministers to read Alice's adventures, just as Ministers in the Victorian Government were instructed to read the '*Yes, Minister*' scripts some two decades ago. Federal Ministers have subjected children and families in immigration detention, child protection workers, state governments and external critics to the same kind of paradoxical communication and entrapment that Lewis Carroll's characters practiced on poor Alice.

'Double-bind theory' helps explain the impact of such communication. In brief, this theory suggests that, in a relationship that has survival value for the weak, the strong will issue orders or make statements which they require to be obeyed or agreed with. In practice it is impossible for the weaker party to do this. Children repeatedly subjected to such communication frequently develop schizophrenia.

Americans Paul Watzlavick, Janet Beavin and Don Jackson, in their book '*Pragmatics of Human Communication*', provide a simple example of the double-bind by drawing attention to a sign placed on a bridge which spanned an American freeway. The sign said 'Ignore This Sign'. In order to obey,

you must first notice the sign. But noticing the sign violates the instruction to ignore it. You are trapped; no matter what you do you will be wrong.

Lewis Carroll was the master of this kind of communication. Remember his dialogue between Alice and the Red and White Queens? Alice is asked how to make bread. She replies that you get some flour, and is asked where you pick the flour? When she replies that you don't pick it because it's ground, she is asked how many acres of ground she means, and told to stop leaving so many things out. On it goes; no matter what Alice says, she is wrong. Humpty Dumpty in his famous 'when I use a word it means what I say it means' speech spelled out the purpose. It was not about the meaning of words, but about who was in control.

The Federal Government's communication over children in detention mirrors such exercises in control and entrapment. Everyone else has been blamed. The child protection workers who investigated abuse of children at Woomera and seem to have substantiated the existence of abuse (admittedly such words were not used publicly) were wrong, as was the South Australian Government. The trap is sprung tight by the existence of a Memorandum of Understanding which in essence retained the responsibility for protecting children in detention in Woomera (and subsequently in Baxter) in the hands of the Federal Government. Confidentiality provisions prevent the South Australian Government from commenting without Federal permission. So the Federal Government can safely criticise everyone, knowing that the evidence of what abuses have been officially substantiated can never see the light of day.

The Federal Government's paradoxical communication has also been aimed at children and their parents. Fifteen-year-old Alamdar Bakhtiari was interviewed by a Melbourne *Age* reporter Russell Skelton earlier this year¹. Skelton described him as showing all the signs of institutionalisation (having been in detention for nearly three years). Alamdar said he hated Australia, hated Baxter, but was afraid to leave; fearing the outside world more than his detention. In a curious twist, one of the factors holding up the Bakhtiari family's return to Pakistan (Mr. Bakhtiari had had his claim to be Afghan rejected) was that it was too dangerous for officials

to travel to Pakistan to get travel documents.

An Iraqi family who had been in detention for four years was deported. They were given a one-month tourist visa for Vietnam, and open tickets to fly from there to Syria and Iran, though they had no visas for those countries. They hoped to obtain these in Vietnam. However Australian authorities faxed authorities in Vietnam before the family arrived, warning that they were deportees and to use caution in dealing with them. Not surprisingly they were forced to return to Perth, and detention, after only two days. One of the children was said to have early psychosis. A spokesman for the Minister blamed the family for contacting the media, saying they had been repeatedly cautioned that a high profile would not help them. So we forced them to leave, made this impossible, then blamed them. The trap *par excellence*.

Earlier the link was drawn between such communication patterns and schizophrenia. One would never suggest that the government intends this with regard to children in detention, but it is reasonable to say that they have taken mind games far beyond what is moral or defensible. The distress and damage caused to children and families in detention show this clearly.

In some respects Alice was lucky; she woke up, and her nightmares faded. For children in detention, the nightmares continue, both in the abuses inherent in detention itself and in the double-bind in which the Federal Government has trapped them.

This is a short version of the paper presented by Max Liddell at the 9th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect in Sydney in November 2003.

Footnotes

1. Skelton, R. (2003) 'I hate Australia. I am not a criminal, I have done nothing wrong', *The Age*, 28 July: 1.

Editorial Note: Some features of the protocol are reproduced in the Full Court of the Family Court's Judgment in B (Infants) and B (Intervener) and the Minister for Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs (2003) FLC 93-141 available at www.familycourt.gov.au. Findings as to harm are found in the subsequent decision of (B and B) and the Minister for Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs [2003] FamCA 62, not yet reported, at the same site.