

## EDITORIAL

### Introduction to the Special Issue

Professional psychology in Australia has experienced significant changes in recent years. Not only has a system of national registration become mandatory for all allied health professionals, but endorsement for specialist areas of psychological practice introduced (Psychology Board of Australia, 2011). Such changes, in addition to new federal government arrangements for the funding of psychology sessions under Medicare and the differential reimbursement rates (Department of Health and Aging, 2011), have prompted renewed debate about the distinctiveness of specialties within professional psychology in Australia, the competencies that are required to practice in specific areas, and the need for specialist postgraduate training pathways.

This Special Issue of *Australian Psychologist* contributes to this debate by publishing a collection of papers that focus exclusively on forensic psychology. In conjunction with the virtual issue of *Australian Psychologist*, published in 2011 to coincide with the Australian Psychological Society's College of Forensic Psychology's national conference, this collection of articles by eminent Australian psychologists helps to delineate some of the many areas of practice that require the specialist skills and competencies of forensic psychology.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS, 2011) defines forensic psychology as the application of psychological theory, concepts, and skills to the civil arena and criminal justice system and to people who work in, participate in, or are influenced by it. The definition is intentionally broad, encompassing the areas where psychology and law intersect. Despite this breadth, most professional practice in forensic psychology in Australia can be encompassed by two broad areas: *forensic evaluations* and *forensic interventions*. Forensic psychological evaluations are conducted to assist a court or other tribunal to determine facts, arbitrate disputes, or make other forms of judicial or quasi-judicial decisions. Examples of such evaluations include single expert reports in the Family Court of Australia, fitness-to-stand trial evaluations in criminal courts, psychological assessments of criminal injuries compensation claimants, and evaluations of parenting competence and protective capacity in child-protection litigation. Psychological interventions are defined as forensic if they are delivered to persons, couples, or families who are engaged in or influenced by legal proceedings or who are vulnerable to being involved in legal proceedings. Examples of forensic interventions include offending behaviour programmes that are delivered by correctional services, therapy with sexual assault victims, treatment for those who have suffered psychological injuries from compensable events, restorative justice programmes, treatment of substance use disorders, and community-based programmes to prevent sexual or family

violence. In addition to these broad areas of practice, forensic psychologists fulfil a variety of other roles in the legal system, including those that involve law reform and legislative and policy development, and a variety of consultant roles such as trial consultants (e.g., assisting barristers to cross-examine mental health practitioners) and acting as consultants to correctional services about prisoner management and rehabilitation.

Melton, Petrilla, Poythress, and Slobogin (2007) summarise the distinctive nature of forensic psychology in relation to "the identity of the client, the focus of the examination, the response style and involvement of the examinee, and the dynamics and pace of the evaluation" (p. 44). They go on to state that "unless aware of the differences, otherwise competent clinicians may prove to be naïve forensic examiners, selecting familiar but less than optimal procedures for conducting their assessments, and offering opinions that do not withstand the scrutiny of the adversary system" (p. 44). Two areas in which the problems associated with the use of familiar but inappropriate procedures are in psychological testing and interviewing. With respect to psychological testing, psychologists without relevant forensic training and supervision will use tests that have been developed for non-forensic purposes and which do not function properly in the forensic setting (see, for example, Lenny & Dear, 2009). Similarly, it is essential that forensic assessment data are obtained through competent investigative interviewing and not through standard clinical interviewing methods.

Psychologists who work in a forensic context also commonly find themselves in a position where their recommendations can have serious consequences not only for litigants (loss of liberty, having to pay damages, etc.) but also for others involved in the litigation (e.g., children who are the subjects of a Family Court dispute), and for judicial decision-making generally. It is, therefore, essential that forensic work is undertaken by psychologists who have specialist training in the area and that psychologists do not work outside of their area of professional competence. Yet the opportunities for training in Australia are becoming increasingly limited. The College of Forensic Psychologists is very concerned that at the time of preparing this Special Issue there are no Australian Psychology Accreditation Council-approved postgraduate forensic psychology training programmes in South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory.

The articles that have been included in this Special Issue clearly illustrate the specialist nature of forensic psychological practice. The first article, by Professor Don Thomson, discusses the particular ethical issues that arise when working in a forensic setting. It is suggested that specialist guidelines are required to guide practice in the forensic area, and we would recommend that any psychologist who is interested in undertaking forensic work pays careful attention to the points that Professor Thomson raises. The second article, by Professor Alfred Allan,

doi: 10.1111/ap.12001

further our understanding of these issues in his careful analysis of the norms that guide legal-ethical decision-making. Collectively, these two papers offer a strong foundation for ethical practice that will be reflected in the specialist ethical guidelines for forensic psychologists that will be published by the APS in 2013.

The next two articles relate to what are considered core areas of forensic psychological practice. They outline some of the foundational knowledge that is required to work competently in the forensic field and identify some of the common problems that even experienced practitioners face. First, Professor Jane Goodman-Delahunty and Dr Mandeep K Dhimi provide an examination of Australian court reports, and then Dr Gavan Palk and Dr Stephen Morgan consider the assessment of psychological injury in civil litigation. The next three articles describe specific areas in which forensic psychologists work. Professor Stephen Smallbone and Susan Rayment-McHugh talk about the role of forensic psychologists in crime prevention, and Professor James RP Ogloff and colleagues, including members of the Victorian police force, discuss the contribution of forensic psychology to policing. Finally, Dr David A Bright and Dr Kristy A Martire review the evidence supporting mandated treatment for substance use.

It is of particular significance that the final article of the Special Issues focuses on psychological practice with Indigenous Australians. It is now common knowledge that those who identify as from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural backgrounds are grossly over-represented across all areas of the criminal justice system, and yet progress towards the development of culturally safe and culturally appropriate methods of psychological assessment and treatment has been slow. In her article, Dr Chris Gillies argues that it is critical to consider the social, legal, political, and psychological context in which Indigenous people currently engage with the justice system if psychologists are to make a meaningful contribution to this area.

Collectively, we hope that these articles offer evidence of the vibrant, innovative, and challenging nature of forensic psychological practice, and we would very much like to thank the contributors for their efforts in making this Special Issue possible. We are confident that you will find each of the articles both interesting and informative.

Andrew Day,<sup>1</sup> Michael Daffern,<sup>2</sup> Greg Dear,<sup>3</sup> and Astrid Birgden<sup>4</sup>;  
on behalf of the APS College of Forensic Psychologists

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology, Deakin University  
andrew.day@deakin.edu.au

<sup>2</sup>School of Psychology and Psychiatry, Monash University and  
Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health  
michael.daffern@monash.edu

<sup>3</sup>School of Psychology and Social Work, Edith Cowan University  
g.dear@ecu.edu.au

<sup>4</sup>School of Psychology, Deakin University  
astrid99@hotmail.com

## References

- Australian Psychological Society. (2011). *Careers in psychology: Specialities in psychology*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychology.org.au/>
- Department of Health and Aging. (2011). *Access to allied psychological services*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-boimhm-ataps>
- Lenny, P., & Dear, G. E. (2009). Faking good on the MCMI-III: Implications for child custody evaluations. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 91*, 553–559.
- Melton, G. G., Petrilla, J., Poythress, N. G., & Slobogin, C. (2007). *Psychological evaluations for the courts: A handbook for mental health professionals and lawyers* (3rd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Psychology Board of Australia. Retrieved September from <http://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Endorsement.aspx>