

EDITORIAL

Conferences

This year, Sydney is hosting our twentieth conference, although the conferences haven't been officially numbered since the twelfth. We present an 'attendance and theme' summary of the first nineteen conferences below, partly to restore some meaning to the act of numbering. You will notice that a conference theme was not automatic from the beginning; in each instance, the number in brackets represents (a guesstimate of) the attendance figures.

First, Melbourne, 1980 (250 limit—more wanted to come!); **Second**: Adelaide, 1981 (350); **Third**: Sydney, 1982: *Exploring the Difference* (600–700); **Fourth**: Brisbane, 1983: *Merging the Streams: Integrating Trends in Family Therapy* (450); **Fifth**: Canberra, 1984 (350); **Sixth**, Melbourne, 1985 (450); **Seventh**: Perth, 1986: *Developmental and Systemic Perspectives: Living with the Interface* (250); **Eighth**: Sydney, 1987: *We Don't have a Theme (And Neither do We)* (500 +); **Ninth**: Hobart, 1988: *Responsible Family Therapist Ethics and Family Therapy* (300); **[Tenth]**: First Australian and New Zealand Combined: Christchurch, 1989 (400); **Eleventh**: Adelaide, January 1991: *Ideas, Ideals, Innovations* (350); **Twelfth**: Brisbane, October 1991: *Exploring Meaning: From the Personal to the Political* (300); **[Thirteenth]**: Second Australian and New Zealand Combined: Melbourne, 1992: *Family Therapy: What's in a Name?* (650); **[Fourteenth]**: Canberra, 1993: *Systems in Settings—Interaction between Systems Approaches and Different Settings* (250); **[Fifteenth]**: Sydney, 1994: *Valuing our Differences* (450); **[Sixteenth]**: Third Australian and New Zealand Combined, Wellington, 1995: *Out from Down Under* (300); **[Seventeenth]**: Hobart, 1996: *Families in Transition* (300); **[Eighteenth]**: Adelaide, 1997: *Journeying Together: Out from Behind Closed Doors* (250); **[Nineteenth]**: Brisbane, 1998: *Strands in the Web: Individuals in Context* (320).

If we examine the themes, it would seem that Sydney conferences have a preference for 'exploring' and 'valuing' differences, and those differences re-emerge in the 1999 theme 'Alternative Voices'. (Have we, in fact, 'valued our differences' over the years, or simply avoided confronting them openly?) Brisbane appears to be particularly cued to *context*. Melbourne seems to be rather reluctant to tie a conference down to a theme, choosing twice to avoid one altogether and the third time, going for a theme deliberately suggestive and open-ended. Twice, a committee has chosen to highlight a movement 'out from' somewhere: a break for freedom? An acknowledgement of felt confinement? Of course conference themes are chosen by organising committees, but like all political choices, they have to stay somewhat in touch with how the field is thinking and feeling.

We can take pride in the range of cities around Australia and New Zealand which have hosted the family therapy movement for its annual gathering. Some associations have been very small, but all have managed to 'take their

turn'. People do say 'Whose turn is it to run the conference next year?' but we should remember that there is no obligation on any state to offer to host the conference in any particular year. States have different motivations for offering. For instance, David Horner, NSW's State President said back in 1997 that the NSWFTA would volunteer for 1999, because, as he pointed out, Sydney in Olympics year would be a place to stay well away from!

Too mechanical an adherence to 'turns' can lead to bad decisions. All of us can remember conferences which were not as successful as others, where the lesson seemed to be that an association should not offer to host a conference when its own house is not in order. (It is rarely helpful for the therapy team to be in the middle of an argument when the clients arrive!) A new sub-committee of the ANZJFT Board has now been set up, chaired by Ann Stark, which is liaising with the state associations and providing a forum for discussion about queuing to host conferences, as well as acting as a source of advice. The financial relationship between the *Journal* and the conferences is now being formalised also.

Of course, no matter where the venue is, a conference offers vastly different experiences for different delegates. We have not, in the past, been sufficiently empathic to the outsider, the person who doesn't know anybody. Brisbane's well-received Newcomer's Session in 1998 offered an opportunity for bonding to people who were attending alone, and for the first time. Nor have the conferences been kind to 'unknown' people offering their first paper. One systemic therapist offered a paper and because no one knew who he was (he worked in the country), no one went to hear him. He never bothered to go again, and concluded on the basis of this (and previous) experience of the movement, that Australian family therapy was 'elitist'. To be fair, some city presenters have also failed to attract an audience, but perhaps, having a group of like-minded peers, have been better able to cope with the disappointment.

There are ways of running a conference which would counter this hidden discrimination. But we don't try them. Our de facto 'weakest to the wall' approach is curiously at odds with our stated interest in every 'strand in the web', in a 'diversity of voices', in 'journeying together out from behind closed doors'. After twenty years, and with attendance figures stable, but never again likely to match Sydney's in 1982, we should be giving renewed consideration to making our conference organisation match our clinical 'ideas, ideals and innovations'.

Hugh and Maureen Crago (with thanks to Glenn Munt for Brisbane figures, Warihi Campbell and Rosemary Smart for the Christchurch figure, and Brian Stagoll for the rest).