

## **SIBLINGS AUSTRALIA**

**15 September 2004**

**The Hon. A.L. EVANS:** In Australia, over 200 000 people under 25 have a severe or profound disability or chronic illness. In addition, there is a significant number of young people with mental illness. I know the impact on families is enormous, and there has been considerable focus on carers in this regard. However, there is an overlooked group in this scenario: the siblings.

Siblings often grow up in a situation of considerable stress brought about by the day-to-day demands on families striving to cope with their disabled, chronically ill or mentally ill child. Children do not have the maturity to understand the mix of feelings they may experience in this situation. Without support, these children are at risk of developing longer term emotional and psychological problems. Siblings Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to address the needs of siblings and, through that process, strengthen the whole family. It is based in Adelaide at the Women's and Children's Hospital, and its mission is 'siblings: acknowledged, connected, resilient'.

The relationship between siblings is often the longest of any. Through relationships with their brothers and sisters, children learn to express emotions such as love, loyalty, anger and rivalry. They gain companionship and support, and they learn to give and take. Siblings help teach each other social skills and play a role in each other's identity development. When one sibling has special needs, other aspects of the relationship can change enormously. Siblings experience a range of feelings and reactions to having a brother or sister with special needs. A child may feel loving and protective towards their brother or sister but, at the same time, they may feel resentment, embarrassment, guilt, sorrow and fear. Without the skills and emotional maturity to understand and deal with those feelings, a child's self-esteem can suffer. Anger and guilt can turn inward and lead to shame and a sense of worthlessness. Longer term problems such as depression and anxiety may then follow.

It is important to intervene early and provide support to children who are at risk of developing emotional problems. Support needs to occur within the range of settings in which a child operates such as immediate and extended family, friends, peers, school and community. Overseas studies have shown that, with appropriate support, siblings will feel less isolated and develop greater understanding and resilience. As a result, not only will they be more likely to develop their full potential but also they are more likely to contribute to the quality of life of their brothers and sisters with special needs.

Since its inception, Siblings Australia has experienced an overwhelming demand for its services by siblings, their families and service providers across Australia. It has already undertaken a wide range of activities, including counselling with individual families and assisting with training to parent groups and service providers about sibling issues. It has also assisted with creating manuals for sibling groups locally, nationally and internationally. Siblings Australia has assisted in the development of network groups through a directory of services and a web site with its resources and information for families. It also assists with policy development and research for the needs of families with siblings in these situations. Siblings Australia looks forward to holding a national conference on sibling issues. It is to be held in Adelaide in November 2004 and has received considerable interest from around the country and overseas. Currently, the organisation is staffed by a full-time director and a part-time project officer, with a voluntary board of management comprising a number of prominent South Australian business and community members.

This organisation is addressing the needs of a group that is overlooked by the current system. However, reliance on a small parcel of one-off funding makes it extremely difficult for it to meet existing demands for its services, let alone achieve its long-term objectives. Some assurance of ongoing funding support is required if Siblings Australia is to remain viable.