

Speech by Dr Paul Dietze PhD
To the 12th Annual Memorial Lecture of the
Lionel Murphy Foundation
Thursday, 17 December 1998

at the Metcalfe Auditorium
State Library of NSW

Thank you Neville and thank you Ladies & gentlemen for giving me the opportunity to speak to you tonight.

Of all of the opportunities that I have had during my life, the one I value most has been the opportunity to further my education – and the highlight of my education was my PhD work. Looking back, I know I would not have completed my PhD work without the scholarships I received during my candidature. So, at the outset I'd like to thank the Foundation and the Trustees for awarding me the scholarship in 1991.

I'm proud of what I was able to achieve with my PhD work. I began my graduate studies as a starry-eyed student who wanted to change the world of the child witness. My partner's experience observing how children were treated in court proceedings left me with sense of outrage and a determination to foster change. How could the state, acting on behalf of children who were abused and neglected, engage in processes which effectively continued the abuse that they had suffered. Better not to prosecute if the prosecution is harmful for the child.

The main thrust of my work was to devise a technique for investigative interviewing that was child focussed and capable of maximising the amount of information that the child could give. I was particularly interested in a technique known as context reinstatement, part of the cognitive interview – a technique widely regarded as the panacea to rid us of poor interviewing practice. My research consisted of a series of experiments that examined the effectiveness of the technique. The overall conclusion? – context reinstatement isn't quite what it's cracked up to be – I could not find consistent statistically significant effects.

But statistically significance is only one form of significance. I'd argue that my findings have nonetheless been significant. What they did show were other, more appropriate ways in which children should be interviewed. Moreover, they stopped us in Victoria from going down the path of using a technique of little or no benefit.

Most importantly however, the research was crucial in informing the contribution I made to the development of a training course for police officers in Victoria. Under the Evidence (Recorded Evidence) regulations in Victoria, police officers must pass this course in order to be allowed to interview children for court. Clearly I've been really fortunate in that my PhD work, on the interface between psychology and law, has produced a direct contribution to policy rather than merely sitting as a thick book on my supervisor's shelf. I guess that this kind of outcome would be in keeping with the Foundation's and indeed Lionel Murphy's own, views of how science can contribute to policy.

The type of science in which I am most interested is that which can be applied directly to questions of policy. I enjoy the challenge of applying findings so that they present social benefit which I think is the aim of all good science. Since working in the area of child witnesses I've moved into the much less controversial area of drug use in the community with my research at Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre in Melbourne. In my new field, everything is cut and dry and science, rather than emotion rules.

But really, the work I do now continues to place me at the interface between science and public policy – trying to foster sensible debate in a complex area. The challenges are neatly summarised in the media response to a seminar we organised earlier in the week. Here, portrayed on the front page of Melbourne's tabloid are some of the results of my work. For those of you who can't see at the back in BOLD print is the usual emotive headline "HEROIN CITY" – obviously designed to play on people's worst fears about where the heroin problem in Melbourne.

However, bucking the usual trend in tabloid reporting, the small print merely described the extent of the heroin overdose problem in Melbourne and some of the sensible responses that we've devised.

Judging by the myriad of phone calls from a diverse range of people I believe it is the message in the text, rather than the headline, that seems to be getting through. And I think there is an inescapable momentum behind the push for a rational public debate in this difficult area. And I'm glad that my current work is contributing to the debate.

Thank you.

