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| Good Practice Bulletin |
| Spotlight on decision making and uncertainty  Office of Professional Practice, Issue 21, May 2019 |

# Chief Practitioner’s welcome

# Chief Practitioner, Tracy Beaton

**Tracy Beaton**

Throughout each day, child protection practitioners make numerous decisions, many of which are often made with limited information and within a context of uncertainty.

In this bulletin we look at strategies for how we can work effectively in a highly pressurised time-critical environment. When timeframes are short, how can we reduce and manage this uncertainty?

The implementation of SAFER Children Risk Assessment Framework (SAFER) will provide practitioners with new tools and resources to guide effective and evidence informed assessment. However, despite our best efforts to manage risk, safety and promote the wellbeing of children, we know that errors will occur. When they do, we must use them as opportunities to improve as individuals and most significantly, as a system.

We are part of a large, complex system and each of us has a role to contribute to its continuous improvement.

# Case study

Gina is the mother of twins Owen and Lana, aged 8 and has been admitted to hospital following her deteriorating mental health. Gina and the children moved to Melbourne last year. The wider maternal and paternal family, including the father, live interstate.

Due to the crisis of Gina’s hospital admission, Owen and Lana have been placed in emergency foster care while information is gathered about possible kinship placements interstate.

The father, Geoff has seriously physically assaulted Gina on at least three occasions, breaking her arm following the most recent assault. The twins were in the home when the assaults occurred. Gina has taken out an intervention order that is effective in Victoria with the children included in the order.

Child protection contracted a private assessment agency to undertake an assessment of the maternal grandparents in Queensland however this assessment has been delayed due to staffing shortages with the agency. The father is growing increasingly irate - calling and emailing you daily. He cannot understand why the children remain in foster care when he and his parents are willing to care for them.

You are the new child protection practitioner for the family; this case was previously unallocated. In ten days time the case returns to court and you need to write the addendum report.

# Discussion prompts

What systemic issues are evident in the case study which have the potential to impact on decision making in the best interests of the children?

What are your priorities over the next ten days? Are there competing priorities?

Where can you access advice and support?

What opportunities are available to contribute to shaping the wider system?

# Decision making principles

Consider the suggested standards for deliberation and decision-making in child protection practice as adapted by Eileen Munro[[1]](#footnote-1).

Read over the nine principles below and from your practice think of examples of these principles being applied. You could also:

* suggest how a principle might be reflected in your work, office, area or across Victoria?
* consider these principles as they apply to the case study?

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| 1. | The child’s safety and well-being come first |
| 2. | Decisions must be made in conditions of uncertainty |
| 3. | Harm and benefits must be balanced |
| 4. | Judge practice by the quality of decision-making not the outcome |
| 5. | Take account of the context in which decision are made |
| 6. | The standard expected of an individual is that of a group of peers comparable in experience |
| 7. | Learn from successes as well as failures |
| 8. | Good information sharing is key to good risk assessment |
| 9. | Encourage and support staff |

If you have any feedback or ideas about what you would find useful to include in the bulletin, please [email Office of Professional Practice](mailto:officeofprofessionalpractice@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <officeofprofessionalpractice@dhhs.vic.gov.au>

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1. Munro, E. (2018) Decision-making under uncertainty in child protection: Creating a just and learning culture. *Child and Family Social Work*. 2018;1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)