



## **IRRESPONSIBLE REPORTING MISLEADS ON WELFARE QUARANTINING**

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17 December 2009

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The Australian Newspaper's front page report (15/12/09) on a recent welfare quarantining study is misleading and irresponsible. It was supported by similar reporting the same morning on ABC radio.

Apparently relying on a second-hand account from Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin, the Australian reported that: "The [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare] report, based on surveys of welfare recipients whose income is being managed, found clear evidence that income management was having a positive effect." The ABC carried direct quotes from the Minister citing evidence selectively from the report, but did not quote from the report itself.

In fact, the evidence presented in the AIHW report is anything but clear and its authors were quite explicit about this.

The Northern Territory Intervention includes a package of measures, not just income management. And the AIHW report clearly cautions that: "the overall evidence about the effectiveness of income management in isolation from other NTER [Northern Territory Emergency Response] measures was difficult to assess."

An example of this difficulty is in interpreting the evidence of increased consumption of fruit and vegetables. A key element of the intervention was the licensing of community stores in order to improve the quality of food available. Unless at least one store was licensed, income management would not go ahead. In order to be licensed, a store had to demonstrate that it stocked a reasonable range and quantity of healthy food. So while there is evidence of increased fruit and vegetable consumption, it is not clear that this is due to income management or the requirement that stores carry stocks of such produce.

Much of the evaluation's evidence is similarly difficult to interpret. For example, the authors report that: "When asked a general question about whether their purchasing behaviour had changed since income management, under half (43%) of the 76 interview participants said that it had, while just over half (57%) said there had been no change." However, other evidence clearly contradicts this further illustrating the difficulties involved in relying on the recollections and perceptions of a small sample.

The authors acknowledge that the evaluation design the department gave them was weak and that the client sample they were given was small and may not have been

representative of all clients. They also acknowledge the difficulties involved in asking people questions about the health and behaviour of their children rather than measuring this directly.

Like many in the community, Catholic Social Services Australia is concerned about the Government's plan to roll out income management across vulnerable communities around Australia. Before this decision is made, we need clear evidence of the likely effects of such a measure — both positive and negative effects. Many of the communities caught up in this initiative will be very different to the Indigenous communities of remote Australia and we simply don't know what many of those effects will be.

Policy makers have an obligation to base their decisions on evidence. But again according to the AIHW report, the studies used in the income management evaluation "would all sit towards the bottom of an evidence hierarchy." Why was this not reported?

Income management limits people's freedom to control their own lives and stigmatises people based solely on their race or where they live. The Government's attempt to address the race based aspects of their previous policy also suggests that there are questions about fairness that must be answered, in addition to the consideration of evidence regarding efficacy.

Governments and Oppositions are both likely to grasp at feeble evidence in order to support preferred policy positions, or in order to gain a lifeline out of a political hotspot. Surely it is the role of media outlets of the standing of the Australian and the ABC to read further than the Minister's press release and to report such stories far more carefully.

On even the tersest reading of the AIHW's report it is clear that evidence about the effectiveness of income management is weak. And no evidence is considered regarding the impact such a policy may have in other communities in Australia. It is therefore difficult to understand why the story featured so prominently and why the evidence was presented so positively in media outlets such as the Australian Newspaper and ABC radio.

If we are to resolve such intractable problems as entrenched social disadvantage effectively, robust collection and examination of evidence will be one of the most effective weapons in our arsenal. Political manipulation of evidence to promote a particular ideological point of view or to solve a particular political problem will retard our progress. The Australian and the ABC would do well to ensure that their pursuit of a scoop, or their eagerness to remain on the short-list of politically favoured media outlets, does not blind them to their responsibility to present a balanced representation of the facts.

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