



## Meals on Wheels in New South Wales: A Discussion Paper

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**Publication details:**

Working Paper No. 39  
Reports and Proceedings  
858233436 (ISBN)

**Publication Date:**

1984

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/973>

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# SWRC Reports and Proceedings

No 39

March 1984

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MEALS ON WHEELS IN NEW SOUTH WALES:  
A DISCUSSION PAPER

by

RANDALL SMITH



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ISSN 0159 9607  
ISBN 85823 3436

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## CONTENTS

Foreword	i
Preface	ii
Introduction	1
Part I: 1956-1969	2
Part II: 1970-1975	6
Part III: 1976-1980	13
Part IV: 1981-1983	22
Reflections	37
Bibliography	42

## Foreword

In the Social Welfare Research Centre a team has been working steadily on the welfare of elderly people. While the prime focus has been on community care the orientation has been on policy and provision rather than on assessment of specific outcomes or recipient based evaluations. The seven previously published reports in the ageing area (numbers 4, 5, 16, 20, 23, 35 and 38 —see back cover) illustrate the diversity of research methods used to tackle, from different angles, the many complex questions which together help us understand how people live. At times we have attempted to collect new data; at other times to rework existing data which have either not been compiled or manipulated to answer the sorts of questions we wish to answer; at other times we have worked on the analysis, extension, and development of contemporary theory, informed by our empirical work.

This piece by Randall Smith is not an empirical study of a sample of Meals on Wheels services, it is not an evaluation of the performance of the services, it is not a study of those who deliver or receive Meals on Wheels. It is instead, an attempt to describe the development of the services in New South Wales, and to identify the policy interventions and activities which have given the services their present form and structure. In the process it demonstrates Smith's perceptive eye and his ability to assemble a policy edifice. He has worked tirelessly at finding and understanding the available literature (listed on pages 42-48) and has interviewed numerous people involved with Meals on Wheels. The policy analysis he has brought to this exercise is extremely valuable. He has argued that there is a tremendous shortfall in provision, yet the mechanisms which could begin to attack the deficiency are characterised by dreadful fragmentation, inability to take initiative, and lack of an acknowledged base of responsibility or clearly defined auspices. The answers to the problems are not in this monograph, but an important mark of a provocative piece of research or analysis is that it raises questions and stimulates further research. I hope that this paper does this, and Randall Smith helps us on pages 38 to 40 by outlining six possible further research areas.

Randall Smith who is Senior Lecturer in the School for Advanced Urban Studies in the University of Bristol, U.K. spent three months late in 1983 as a Visiting Fellow at the SWRC. In that time he worked on a number of SWRC projects and this monograph is the result of just one. It is published primarily to stimulate discussion and hopefully to plant some seeds for further research. Given the very short time he was in Australia it is not appropriate to think of this as any more than an introduction to the issues, but it is hoped that this and any follow up will help us in assembling the complex and ill fitting components of the community care collage.

Adam Graycar

Director

Social Welfare Research Centre

## PREFACE

This paper has been prepared during three months study leave from the University of Bristol, England at the Social Welfare Research Centre, University of New South Wales. The compiler of this paper wishes to thank the Director of the Centre for providing the opportunity to spend his study leave in the Centre, and to thank him and other members of the Welfare of the Elderly Team for their support and encouragement in his efforts. Thanks are equally due to all those who gave their time to provide information and to answer questions about the meals on wheels service in New South Wales. They included administrators of individual services, officials from local, State and Commonwealth government, and the staff of peak voluntary organisation in New South Wales.

Needless to say, all errors of fact, as well as the expression of tendentious opinion, are the responsibility of the compiler. Readers may find much to correct or to challenge. The work was undertaken in some haste.

## INTRODUCTION

For a visitor to comment on the issues facing a particular service in his or her country of temporary residence is likely to be labelled as either bold or foolish, or possibly both. Undoubtedly, it is a high risk enterprise, because of lack of appreciation of the political and cultural norms within which a community service may have developed, and because of a lack of time to draw upon the richness of documentary material and human experience engaged in the service under scrutiny. But the delivery of meals on wheels to people in their own homes in New South Wales was too fascinating to resist, and this discussion paper is the result.

My own view of the service, which it is only right should be stated at the outset, is that it is staffed - in general - by an enthusiastic group of committed people, whether they are paid or unpaid. However, the origins of the service and the way it has developed have, over time, created problems for introducing change in the light of changes elsewhere. The latter may be found in the level of demand for the service, the costs of organising and running the service, the expectations of carers in other community and social services, or in shifting governmental policies and practices. The difficulties thus created are being directly addressed by some who are deeply concerned for the future of the service, but others have focussed more on defending the existing way of working, and have been less willing to examine the arguments for change.

This view may be challenged as one-sided, as one of the major biases in the sources of information used is their urban cast. Nearly all the written material has been prepared in an urban context by, in all probability, urban people. The limited number of visits made to individual services have all been within metropolitan Sydney. Yet over 80 per cent of the services are located outside the metropolitan area, mainly outside urban areas. However, over half the total number of meals are delivered in the metropolitan area. For better or worse, this is one of the limitations of this paper, and may go some way to explain some of the comments in it.

The report is aimed, in the main, at people working in individual services, peak organisations, and different levels of government. It is not written for academics. Hence there are no footnotes or references - the usual academic paraphernalia - though a bibliography is provided at the end of the paper.

I do hope the report will prove of interest - and use.

PART I: 1956-1969

The first meals on wheels services in Australia were started in Victoria and South Australia in the early 1950s. In New South Wales, the Council of the City of Sydney was the first organisation to provide such a service, and it served its first meals in March 1957 after several months of consultation and visits to services in other States and abroad.

It was characterised as both a food service and a social service, which meant that it embraced a variety of objectives viz provision of meals of good nutritional value; provision of subsidised meals at an attractive price (the cost to the consumer in December 1983 of a meal provided by this service in Sydney was only 50 cents); provision of social contact for isolated and possibly housebound people, most of whom would be likely to be elderly; provision for monitoring those "at risk" in health or social terms. The development of this service in the inner area of Sydney may also have had a political dimension in that the dominant Labor group on the Council wished to hold or attract the votes of the kinds of people likely to be resident within its boundaries.

The NSW Council on the Ageing was also founded in 1956, and it soon became involved in the development and promotion of meals on wheels (MOW) services in different parts of the State, particularly country areas. A retired State public servant was appointed in 1958, supported by a State government grant, as a field officer to encourage the establishment of new services. A second officer was appointed later. Their method of working was to identify a local influential person, and then over time to convince her or him of the importance of developing a service in the area. By these means, particular kinds of individuals became strongly associated with the early years of MOW services in New South Wales, and many are still actively involved today, despite the passing of years.

So well based did the service seem to be that the August 1965 report of the NSW Consultative Committee for the Care of the Aged, appointed by the State Minister of Health, concluded that although it was of great value, no additional subsidy was required for the service, even though in general the development of domiciliary services was important in order to minimise the admission of people to institutions for other than medical reasons.

The reference to "additional subsidy" was in part a recognition of the direct service or financial support role of local government authorities, but in particular reflected the decision of the then State Hospital Commission to allow local hospital boards to agree that hospital kitchens could be used for the preparation of meals in areas where other cooking facilities were inadequate or nonexistent, provided that

there was capacity in the kitchen to provide the extra meals. No extra staff would be allowed, nor could additional equipment be purchased. The consequence of this was that the cost of meal preparation to the MOW service covered only the cost of the ingredients.

The emerging complexity of the financial base of the MOW service can be discerned in this period prior to the introduction of Commonwealth subsidy in 1970. Apart from reliance on hospital kitchens, which was a major subsidy in some areas and non-existent in others, the nature and variety of local government support was also very considerable. It ranged from generous funding of all aspects of the service, through the provision of kitchens and other premises at a peppercorn rent, making available staff for the preparation or delivery of the meals, underpinning the costs of transporting the meals in terms of either equipment, vehicles or fuel, to simply being represented on the management committee.

One of the distinctive characteristics of the MOW service was that it was heavily, where not entirely, dependent on volunteers. People gave their time to serve on the management committee, to organise the service, to prepare the food, and to deliver the meals. The absence of paid staff, even though considerable resources, including governmental support of one kind or another, were being used, tended to result in an expectation of accountability little different from that of the local flower show or chess club. The management committee would hold an annual meeting, with audited accounts, but would not necessarily expect many people to attend, let alone be questioned about their stewardship.

This tradition has continued in more recent times in some services, despite the arrival of paid organisers, paid kitchen staff, and at least back up paid emergency delivery systems to fill in when the voluntary system falters. The position is somewhat different for those services directly provided by local government, though the picture may be no clearer to the local ratepayer.

By the end of the 1960s, there were 107 services in New South Wales, 37 in metropolitan areas and 70 in country areas. About two-thirds of the meals were being prepared in hospital kitchens at a price of 25 cents a meal. The cost to recipients ranged between 20 and 40 cents. About 800,000 meals were being served in a year.

Eligibility to receive meals on wheels was based on a doctor's recommendation, and this tended to define the service organiser's role as an administrative one, rather than being concerned with the assessment or reassessment of potential or actual recipients of meals. The reliance on a doctor's recommendation also implied that relatively little attention was paid to the need, as opposed to the demand, for the service.

The dependence on a doctor's recommendation could have been one of the factors contributing to the lack of focussed, active debate on the aims and objectives of the service. The main role of the organiser was to provide an efficient and humane service to those recommended to receive it. An organiser would be more likely to be busy seeking out more volunteers than looking for more recipients. However, the lack of control over eligibility for the service and the reliance on the judgment of doctors was to give many organisers headaches in the future, as demand rose and more and more volunteers were required. One obvious rationing device was not to consider the level of need for the service.

#### Commentary

What conclusions can be drawn from the early years of the meals on wheels service in NSW? The emphasis on developing adequate local services using local resources, particularly unpaid labour, lay the foundations for what may be termed "traditional localism". The capacity and wish to develop a satisfactory local service in the light of the organisers' and office bearers' interpretations of local circumstances was the essence of the meals on wheels development. Formal accountability was token and ritualistic.

This absence of obligation beyond the local level has been linked with the idea of a helpful and responsive flexibility in service provision, by which is meant informality rather than set procedures to deal with lapses in the delivery system, and some reluctance to end the provision of meals to those whose condition had improved and who would not in their improved circumstances be initially recommended for meals on wheels by a doctor.

A difficulty of this kind would be more likely to be faced by MOW organisers in a small country service in an area where most people knew each other than in a more impersonal urban area. Where there was some spare capacity in the service, this local discretion would be even more likely to occur, though it could well be argued that continuation of MOW under improved circumstances may help the individual to continue to live in sustained improved circumstances. At any rate systematic reassessment was, and still is, comparatively rare.

On a State wide canvas, therefore, traditional localism had resulted in huge differences between areas, even neighbouring authorities or suburbs. In some areas there would be no service at all, in others an infrequent delivery, and in a few a Monday to Friday once a day provision at lunchtimes. The price per meal would also vary between services, depending on the level of direct or indirect subsidy and the operation or otherwise of a local policy of maintaining a financial reserve.

One further consequence of the individuality of particular services was that relatively little communication and learning took place between services. As volunteers involved in the provision of a service, there may not have been much motivation to address other ways of achieving the goals of the service, goals which themselves may have been regarded as self-evident rather than issues for debate. The role of the NSW Council on the Ageing was therefore not easy to determine, let alone, act upon in this context. For instance the first of the Council's practical seminars for MOW organisers and volunteers did not occur until after the Commonwealth subsidy had been introduced in 1970. However, it was able to arrange other practical matters, such as a cheap insurance scheme to cover volunteers.

PART II: 1970-1975

The arguments in the 1965 NSW Consultative Committee on the Care of the Aged report were used by State Ministers of Health in putting forward their case for Commonwealth support for the development of home support services for frail and elderly people. In view of the Consultative Committee's opinion that no additional subsidy was needed for the MOW service, it is not surprising that it was excluded from the State Grants (Home Care) Act 1969, though it was - and currently still is - the case that many aspects of MOW services not covered under the 1970 legislation could have been cost shared between the States and the Commonwealth. This includes the salary of paid staff to deliver meals, out-of-pocket expenses of volunteers, the cost of vehicles used in delivering meals, and the construction of kitchens used in the preparation of meals.

Why then was legislation specifically in relation to subsidising the direct costs of delivered meals passed in the very next year (1970), and why did the subsidy system completely bypass the States? There may be more than one explanation. For instance, a separate promise was made by the Federal Prime Minister in his policy speech for the 1969 election that in the next budget a subsidy would be available to each organisation providing a regular MOW service. Such a promise could attract some votes. Alternatively "traditional localism" and the lack of direct financial involvement by the States in the early years of the service might have suggested that the financial relationship could be a direct one between the Commonwealth and local services.

The Delivered Meals Subsidy Bill was debated in Parliament in March 1970, and received the Royal Assent on 15 April 1970. A subsidy of 10 cents a meal was payable to "eligible organisations", that is, non-profit religious, charitable or benevolent organisations, or a local governing body. The subsidy was available to a service providing meals for elderly or disabled people or both, and the meals did not have to be eaten in the recipients' own homes. The service had to operate on five days a week or be prepared to extend its existing service to five days a week. The aim of the legislation was to assist in the establishment, expansion, improvement or maintenance of MOW services.

In his Second Reading speech, the Minister for Social Services implied that equity between States was one of the guiding principles. He calculated that the number of meals required "to do the job fully" was about five million rather than the two million currently provided. This target figure of five million seemed to be based on the view that differences between States should not be substantial, yet current demand was not being satisfied even in South Australia where the service was providing a substantially higher number of meals per thousand population per year than any

other State. The South Australian figure of 322 meals per thousand population was roughly equivalent to four million meals per year for Australia as a whole.

This broad idea of equity between States might have implied a form of Federal intervention to achieve such a goal. But the explicit aims, as already noted, were general and related to individual services not in any State context. Indeed, the Minister pointedly stated that the Commonwealth government did not wish "to interfere unnecessarily with the affairs of any organisation by laying down rigid conditions in regard to the application of this subsidy. We are prepared to trust organisations which by their very existence and operation, have shown themselves worthy of trust." This is explicit support for "traditional localism"; a good service is being provided by good people for good people.

Thus the 1970 legislation was silent on issues of eligibility, means testing, charging policy, service procedures, support costs, transport expenses or nutritional value. Responsibility and involvement were avoided at Federal level. Information requirements for the payment of subsidy were also minimal. Further details about the development of services and the problems they faced were to be obtained by annual visits to services from the State offices of the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (later Social Security), but budget restrictions on travel by Commonwealth public servants in 1971 meant that this aspect of the service did not develop in any coherent way.

The Department did, however, undertake an investigation following reports of difficulties in recruiting volunteers and problems in obtaining a reliable and economic source of meals. One of the consequences was an increase in the subsidy to 15 cents a meal with effect from 1 January 1972 plus an extra 5 cents to services which undertook to provide an approved Vitamin C supplement with each delivered meal.

The NSW Council on the Ageing took credit for the introduction of this supplement. In 1969 in cooperation with Hoffman Roche Pharmaceuticals and in consultation with Dr Joan Woodhill, a nutritionist, the Council undertook a project on Vitamin C deficiency amongst elderly people. The behaviour patterns over time of elderly people in their own homes were noted down by a group of twelve observers. The outcome of this exercise was the 5 cents Vitamin C supplement in 1972, and the supplement was still 5 cents at the end of 1983.

A second increase in the subsidy, in response to rising food costs, to 20 (or 25) cents was introduced with effect from 1 January 1973, and at the same time it was agreed that payments to services should be made quarterly rather than annually. A further increase in the subsidy to 25(or 30) cents took effect from 1 July 1974. No further increases in the subsidy were made until 1980.

What were the main implications of this Commonwealth legislation for NSW? It undoubtedly encouraged the expansion of existing services and the establishment of new ones. The level of Commonwealth subsidy to services in NSW rose nearly eight-fold between 1969-70 and 1974-75, from \$63,144 to \$481,979, though it is important to discount for the increases in the unit size of the subsidy and for the introduction of the Vitamin C supplement. It can be assumed that the number of services increased by at least 50 per cent and the number of meals provided at least doubled between 1970 and 1975 in NSW.

The Commonwealth legislation also seemed to provide greater legitimation for the State-wide functions of the Council on the Ageing, even though the MOW service was available to disabled people who were not elderly. Its field officers continued their careful efforts to develop services, particularly in country areas, and in 1970 appeared the first edition of a State-wide directory of meals on wheels services. As already noted, the first seminar for those involved in MOW services was held, focussing on such practical issues as rostering techniques, equipment, nutrition and kitchen layouts.

In addition, the Council established a Committee chaired by the Professor of Health Administration at the University of New South Wales, to provide MOW services throughout the State with advice, following investigations and evaluation of volunteer training, equipment, diet and bulk buying. The impact of this Committee may have been relatively modest either because of local suspicion of what could be construed as central direction, or because the Committee itself wanted to ensure that it did not raise such suspicions.

The City of Sydney MOW service was one of the earliest to exhibit signs of stress and strain with the growth of demand, changing technology, and a concern for greater effectiveness. Conflict emerged between the food and social services aspects of MOW. In 1971 responsibility for the service was transferred from the Town Clerk's Department to the Parks and Recreation Department, and this transfer was accompanied by changes in the organisation of the service.

The City Council had commissioned a report from Nationwide Food Services Pty Ltd on the catering side of the MOW service, and its report had pointed out that by 1970 the service was costing \$140,000 a year, and a business of that magnitude needed to be run by a technically qualified person in order to improve efficiency, rather than by social welfare workers who had been responsible for the organisation of the service since its inception in 1957.

A catering officer began work in June 1972 and in September the Council approved changes to the operation of the MOW service, based on techniques developed in the

takeaway food industry. The Controller of Parks suggested that a reappraisal of the use of social workers' time was needed.

The upshot, apparently, was furious criticism and in October 1972 the Controller of Parks put into train a survey of the service to be undertaken internally by a team of officials, including social workers. The introduction to the report of the survey, which covered recipients of the service, volunteers, social workers and the catering officer, stated: "it is important to note that, with the exception of the client, those interviewed expressed intense feelings of anger and frustration about the Food Service. We came to realise that these feelings could only be understood within the perspective of organisational change".

One of the results of the change was the feeling that the volunteers in particular no longer felt identified with the service, and had consequently complained bitterly about the quality of the food, the organisation of the service, the equipment and kitchen facilities. "The old guidelines were no longer meaningful. Lack of knowledge about the new structures and lack of preparation on the reasons for change resulted in feelings of alienation." It could be suggested that no amount of careful preparation would have lessened the feelings of those who had been with the service for many years, and had placed great importance on the social aspect of MOW, though such preparation might have made the expression of bitterness more difficult.

209 volunteers had completed questionnaires. 150 were aged fifty or over, and 158 reported that they have been recruited through a church group. This example of strong reaction by older, typically church oriented people to changes in a local government run MOW service, while understandable in terms of the changing nature of the service, also reinforces the argument of "traditional localism", and explains the caution of the NSW Council on the Ageing in its relationships with the large majority of services in the State which were not run by local government authorities. Only 5 per cent of all meals on wheels services in NSW were run directly by local government, according to a 1979 survey by the Local Government Association of New South Wales.

The majority of services were located in country areas and did not operate on anywhere near the scale of the City of Sydney service, and the problems they faced were those of recruitment of volunteers and having satisfactory bases for the preparation of meals. In general, the MOW services did not in the early 1970s have to face up to major challenges, except those of expansion induced by the new Commonwealth subsidy.

This absence of upheaval is perhaps of significance in its own right, as it included the period of the Whitlam-led government at Commonwealth level, the Australian Assistance Plan and the encouragement of Regional Councils of Social Development, policies bypassing the State structure, just like the delivered meals subsidy. There seemed to be little engagement on the part of MOW services in the innovative programmes supported by the Regional Councils.

A plausible account for this may not be difficult to find. The origin, outlook and political stance of those who enthusiastically adopted and took forward the ideas emerging from a radical Federal Labor administration, involving maximum public participation, localisation of services, the appropriate regulation of services to maintain the pre-eminence of the consumer etc, were rather unlikely to be shared by those who, with some individual exceptions, could be described as believers in "traditional localism", with sceptical or suspicious views about governmental initiatives in the field of social care.

It was under the auspices of the 1972-75 Federal Labor government that the first of a series of reports on possible strategies or policies for elderly people emerged in August 1975. The Social Welfare Commission noted that the bulk of the evidence it received on the MOW service supported the idea of the volunteer nature of service delivery, mainly for the social contact it provided particularly for the isolated. (The assumption in this evidence was that social contact by volunteers was in some way better than social contact by paid staff.)

However, it also noted that the very nature of the service - delivery of a set number of meals during the lunchtime period - limited the extent of this social contact, and recognised that many services were coming under greater pressure from increasing demand. In this context, the report quoted at length from the evidence of the Director of the NSW Council on the Ageing:

"Originally, meals on wheels was an additional supportive service which enabled old people to eat better than if they fended for themselves. It was not taken seriously by the general practitioner and he often prescribed the meal for the social aspects, in that someone was sure to come in occasionally. However, in the last few years when acute hospitals have had to look at their bed costs, they have discharged patients days or even weeks earlier than they would have done before. They assume that the meals on wheels service is sufficiently good to fulfil the old person's dietary needs. They forget that the patient has to have other meals - a breakfast and a tea - ..... Meals on wheels can get by only as a maintenance service with five meals a week, but if it is to be a substitute for

hospitals then greater provision must be made for the other two meals per day and for weekends. The home situation must be professionally assessed, and this is certainly not done in most services, to see whether there is anyone who can do the shopping, the cleaning, and keep an eye on the old person at night."

#### Commentary

What conclusions can be drawn about the MOW service in New South Wales in the first half of the 1970s? It was a period of growth in terms of both the number and size of services, fuelled in great part by the incentive of a Commonwealth subsidy, itself part of a gradual move to try to increase support for community rather than institution-based services for the frail and vulnerable.

However, it was also the case that the opportunities presented by the States Grant (Home Care) Act 1969 to provide financial assistance for the development of MOW services were not taken up (perhaps not even recognised) by local organisations. This may have been due to the unwillingness of local organisations to involve State Government in the operation of this community service.

The first half of the 1970s was also a period in which the growth of the MOW service began to demonstrate the inadequacy of the organisational and financial systems of support for the service. The level of Commonwealth subsidy under the 1970 legislation, despite the increases and the Vitamin C supplement, was geared only to a proportion of the costs of the ingredients of the meals, and totally ignored the costs of buildings, equipment, transport and labour.

Perhaps, the token amount of this subsidy and its link to the costs of the food alone indicated a view of community care that suggested that the costs of that care should lie in the local community with organisations that have shown themselves "worthy of trust", a view that the supporters of "traditional localism" could hardly reject.

What they did seem to reject - or to ignore - were the ideas of what may, in contrasting terms, be characterised as "progressive localism", expressed through notions about national social planning and its relationship to innovative local social welfare schemes, embedded in the philosophy of the Australian Assistance Plan of the Whitlam government. Certainly the ideas of accountability to the consumer and to the sources of funding through the evaluation process were very different from the informal processes of annual meetings and self-reselection on to management committees, and no feedback requirements to Federal level.

During this period the visible involvement of the NSW Council on the Ageing grew in terms of public statements about the needs of the service in general, but it continued to be very cautious in its relationships with the autonomous local branches.

It had no brief to speak on their behalf, nor a fully recognised basis from which to issue guidelines and advice, as opposed to factual information. It could speak much more loudly to government, as in the submission to the Social Welfare Commission, than to the local branches involved in the job of providing the service with inadequate resources, but with a sense of fierce independence.

PART III: 1976-1980

In 1976 the NSW Council on the Ageing organised the first major State-wide Conference for about 400 volunteers and others involved in MOW services. In her opening address, provocatively called "A Failure, A Success, A Challenge", the Director of the Council repeated her concern about the expectations of the service on the part of hospital administrators and doctors, expectations which assumed a seven day a week service and no waiting lists.

If this were to be the future of the service, then adequate funding would be required, including money to pay cooks, support staff and organisers; constraints from the past, such as kitchen size or organisational rigidity, would need to be overcome; training of organisers would be needed to help them take their volunteers with them into the new style of service; and both the State Health Commission and Department of Youth and Community Services (YACS) would have to become involved at the local level.

More starkly, this was a scenario of a soundly funded service with a higher proportion of paid workers than hitherto, with an administrative system developed and staffed to provide a full time service still using volunteers efficiently, and working alongside professionals from State departments to assess the needs of existing and potential recipients.

The activism of the Federal Government between 1972 and 1975 had provided a forum for outlining the future, and every opportunity was taken to repeat the message. Although the message was officially addressed to Federal and State governments, there were also hidden warnings both to and about those in the local services that change was on the horizon and was unlikely to be easy.

A different message, reflecting the dramatic changes at Federal government level in 1975, was heard at the same conference from the spokesman of the Sydney office of the Commonwealth Department of Social Security. He acknowledged the great variation in MOW services in New South Wales, agreed that the situation was not ideal, but reflected the argument that it was flexible in trying to meet the needs of different communities. Thus, inequities did occur, but he queried whether a central controlling body to ensure minimum standards with rigid rules would result in a lessening of the inequities. He wondered whether volunteers would abandon a service of this kind. The speaker asked: is an inefficient service better than none at all?

The message was clear. Long live traditional localism, and don't expect much from a Commonwealth government concerned to devolve responsibilities - if not adequate resources - from the Federal to State level, the so-called "new federalism".

Both the August 1975 Social Welfare Commission report on the care of elderly people and the December 1976 initial report of the Federal Task Force on the co-ordination of health and welfare services had reflected evidence received about the fragmented nature of community services for frail old people and other vulnerable groups, and illogicalities in the application of financial support from governments, including the delivered meals subsidy.

Meals delivered by State hospitals or through the home help service were not eligible for subsidy, whereas meals collected from a State hospital and delivered by a voluntary organisation could be subsidised. The biasing effect of the subsidy in a State where only a small proportion of the services were the responsibility of local government authorities was not inconsiderable. If meals were required and provided at weekends or on public holidays and if - as was customarily the case - volunteers were not available to offer their services on those days, some alternative arrangements, such as the use of home helps, would not be eligible for subsidy.

Both the Commission and the Task Force reports did agree that some rationalisation and integration of the MOW service with other community services was desirable, but did not focus attention on the practicalities of implementing such an idea, though it was recognised that the States would have to be brought formally into any reformed system. The difference between the two approaches was the "progressive localism" of the ideas of the Social Welfare Commission viz maximum public participation etc, compared with the "traditional localism" of the proposals of the Task Force, which was required to take account of the views of consumer groups and voluntary agencies "noting the Government's support of the concept of maximum realistic community participations". Realistic in whose opinion?

The initial report of the Task Force was tabled in the Federal House of Representatives in February 1977 at the same time as the report of the Holmes Committee on the care of infirm and elderly people. This second Federal-level scrutiny of services for frail people also noted the lack of co-ordination between agencies and the ad hoc way in which particular services had been launched. It too recommended some amalgamation of programs, with Commonwealth funding, and reflected the traditional localism of the new federalism by stressing that local involvement should be of those in a position to determine appropriate services rather than engaging the local population in the decision making about services. Like its predecessors, this report too did not address the issue of how to ensure a reliable, comprehensive and accessible MOW service, one of whose main characteristics was dependence on volunteers.

The question has to be raised how such a service could be developed, even if funding were available, if staffing has to rely on what may be a limited number of

committed and enthusiastic unpaid individuals. After all, complaints about shortages of volunteers have not been uncommon. No wonder the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, published in 1975, plaintively - or was it aggressively? - asked: does the improvement of certain domiciliary services have to wait for more volunteers to make themselves available?

It is undeniable that volunteers form the backbone of the MOW service, and this is widely regarded as one of its admirable qualities. One of the less happy features about this kind of arrangement is that it is difficult to be critical, or even analytical, without appearing to challenge very deepseated feelings, and risking unpopularity.

There has been no major large scale study of volunteers in the MOW services in New South Wales, which might help in deciding alternative future strategies for the service, such as an informed approach to recruiting large numbers of new volunteers from sources hitherto untapped, or moving towards a paid service, perhaps along the lines of the home care service. The strong views of volunteers were certainly addressed in the study of the Sydney service in 1972-73, but it was those views, or rather the fierce expression of them, that brought the survey about.

More recently, management students at Seaforth College of Technical and Further Education examined 22 of the 37 MOW services in metropolitan Sydney. They sent questionnaires to medical, nursing and social care staff to obtain opinions about the MOW service; they undertook a small-scale survey of the general public to gather views about the service; and they interviewed MOW organisers. They also left with the organisers questionnaires to be completed by those who delivered the meals, the distributors. Responses to this last questionnaire to distributors were disappointing. Only four services sent back replies.

A number of reasons can be put forward for this. The organisers may not have handed out the questionnaires, or the distributors of the meals may not have been given an adequate explanation of the purpose of the study. But the Seaforth students suggested that the poor response was because most distributors were not very concerned with the broader issues, and wanted to keep their involvement at the present level. If so, this lack of engagement, itself perfectly understandable and often protected by the administrators of the services, must itself act as a brake on the pace and range of changes that can be initiated. The fear of losing volunteers in a situation of a shortage of volunteers leads to a reluctance to change or even examine existing practices.

Some administrators, at least, must feel torn between their understanding that the changing demand for the service is affecting its nature, and their inability to bring about change without embarrassing upheaval, and possibly open conflict with their management committee. Equally, other administrators share the outlook that

the best possible service is already being provided under increasingly difficult circumstances, and that for instance, the level of need in the local community is not very different from the level of known demand.

Meeting demand is seen as the provision of five meals a week (except for public holidays), somehow ignoring the other 120 or so days in the year, and the other meal requirements in any one day. This latter point is countered by the suggestion that recipients keep some of the meal delivered for consumption in the evening. Quite apart from the nutritional aspect of this practice, the only evidence to hand is from the 1972-73 Sydney survey in which it was found that just under 12 per cent of the recipients (19 out of 160 interviewed) stated that this was their practice.

The earlier point about lack of coverage at weekends and on public holidays has been recognised. A handful of services have tried to develop a skeleton coverage for the most needy, facing the issue of food preparation as well as meal delivery. A weekend service is more feasible where the meals are prepared in hospital kitchens which would be working in any case.

But why is it believed to be so difficult to recruit volunteers at weekends as opposed to weekdays, especially as church groups are reported to be one of the main sources of helpers? The typical frequency of help is once a fortnight or once a month. Why not on a Saturday or Sunday? Is there a real difficulty? Are most of the volunteers women with increased family commitments at the weekend? Or is it a matter of custom and practice - of tradition?

There is little hard information on this issue, though the point is made that administrators need time off, but that hardly seems an insuperable argument, except for those administrators who find it difficult to let go of their responsibilities. Do they not take annual leave? Or if they do, does the service then close down? These questions are not meant to suggest that there are available easy and simple solutions. But are they being actively addressed?

Returning to a State-wide canvas, it was in 1978 that the Health Commission provided a \$12,000 grant (subsequently renewed) to the NSW Council on the Ageing to employ a MOW consultant. The Council - and the consultant - were careful to point out to local services that the consultant (who had previously organised a local service) was there to be consulted on developments and difficulties, and would also perform liaison functions. The task was not to provide direction from the centre.

The emergence of State level interest in services for elderly people was also evident in the Department of Youth and Community Services. In 1978 YACS published a report on elderly people in New South Wales, based on late 1977 information. The study was designed to provide, in the light of increasing numbers of elderly people in

the future, "a guide for Governments, organisations and individuals working with the aged to plan services to keep pace with increasing demands". More attention was paid to the provision of accommodation than to domiciliary services, partly because relevant information on the latter was not readily available in a usable form - one of the consequences of the ad hoc way in which programmes had been launched, and the lack of information feedback systems.

However, the study did report that a MOW service did exist in most local government areas, 50 in the metropolitan region and 158 in the rest of the State. 78 per cent of meals (over two million in a year) were supplied by charitable or religious organisations, and 22 per cent by local government, mainly in the metropolitan region. The report concluded that much work needed to be done in the planning and provision of domiciliary services, and a comprehensive range of services to maintain frail, elderly people in their own homes would have to include a seven days a week MOW service.

Why had this interest in the needs of and policies for frail, older people developed? As is usually the case, there is no single, simple answer. The number of frail, elderly people was increasing, as it had been a decade earlier, when the State Grants (Home Care) and Delivered Meals Subsidy Acts were being debated. However, the economic climate had become less favourable, and there were pressures, particularly from Federal level, to control the amount of public sector expenditure. The State had the power to act, but found itself squeezed on resources. It was important to find ways of using public monies more effectively; and in particular care outside the hospital setting, except for acute medical reasons, was seen as both a desirable and perhaps cheaper means of supporting the frail and the infirm.

The argument about the appropriate forms of community care for elderly people had been fuelled by a series of reports officially commissioned by Federal Governments. The States were beginning to respond in the mid and later 1970s; in any case, they needed to be able to answer the challenges thrown out about their role from such organisations as the NSW Council on the Ageing. Finally the main State agency hitherto involved in New South Wales had been the Health Commission; and the Department of Youth and Community Services, with its overall responsibilities for social as opposed to health care, needed to demonstrate its centrality in the development of strategies of community care for the frail and vulnerable, as well as being responsible for child care and youth services.

A further report from the Community Liaison Bureau of YACS appeared in January 1980, and outlined in rather general form directions for changes in policies, including the establishment of an Aged Policy and Projects Unit within the

Department. The basis of the new strategy was that of "a comprehensive home support or domiciliary services policy to be a viable and consistent alternative to residential care". Such noble and unexceptionable sentiments were not accompanied by a detailed plan of action.

The report focussed on home support services in general (redressing the balance of the previous Departmental paper) rather than specifically on meals on wheels, and listed such major issues for debate as being responsive to local need and supportive of local action especially through decentralisation, having appropriate funding and administrative arrangements at different levels of government, being accountable, avoiding the confusion of overlapping domiciliary services, providing crucial supplementary services such as shopping, creating liaison mechanisms with other important services such as housing and transport, and getting the balance right between institutional and domiciliary care. Thus the document was stronger on principles for changes in direction rather than offering specific and concrete proposals for change, except for the idea of creating a specialist unit within YACS.

Meanwhile, a revamped Domiciliary Care Committee of the NSW Council on the Ageing had focussed on the future of the MOW service as one of its crucial tasks. Preliminary ideas, developed in association with a number of interests, including representatives from YACS, were presented to the participants at a MOW seminar in March 1979. The debate at the seminar modified these preliminary ideas, and consultations were subsequently conducted with all the MOW services in the State.

As a result of this process, the Domiciliary Care Committee produced in January 1980 a set of recommendations for the future of the service. In summary, it was advocated that a State Committee should be formed to be responsible for MOW policy and funding administration under the guidance of the Minister for Youth and Community Services through whose Department the Federal funds would be channelled. In addition, local management committees were recommended, together with the appointment by the State Committee of local liaison officers to pass information to State level and to assist in local policy planning and implementation.

These recommendations were to be debated and voted on at a State MOW conference attended by organisers, volunteers and government officials in July 1980. It proved a stirring day. The opening address was given by the then State Minister for Youth and Community Services, who took the opportunity to attack the Federal Government for its neglect of the MOW service, pointing out that the level of subsidy had not been raised during its five years of office, although there had been an 84 per cent increase in the consumer price index.

The Minister may or may not have been told (or cared) that there would be likely to be many supporters of the Commonwealth government amongst the participants at the conference, particularly - though not solely - those from the country areas. However, from the moment of his contribution there was little chance that any State Committee that might be formed would come under the auspices of the Minister for or Department of Youth and Community Services.

Other speakers at the conference pointed out: (i) that with increased public sector funding, there would have to be some kind of system of accountability to government, even though in the past leadership on policies for elderly people had come in the main from the non-government sector, which had very slender resources; (ii) that the increased funding was vitally necessary for those MOW services under severe financial strain, particularly those unable to get meals prepared in hospital kitchens; (iii) that a united front was crucial for putting effective pressure on State government; (iv) that the service had become a "sacred cow" - meals were provided by good people for good people - and so nobody knew whether it was being effective, or even how to measure its effectiveness.

Following panel discussions, the participants began to debate the recommendations before them. In summary, they rejected the idea of being associated with YACS, and instead agreed that a State Meals on Wheels Committee should be established through the Council on the Ageing with majority representation on the Committee from metropolitan and country MOW organisations. The idea of a local liaison officer was also carried, as were further resolutions from the floor demanding an increase in the level of subsidy and separate funding to cover other costs, such as staff, equipment and transport.

The Federal Government did raise the level of subsidy in November 1980 from 25 (30) to 40 (45) cents with effect from 1 July 1980.

#### Commentary

It can be concluded that the second half of the 1970s was a very important period for the MOW service in New South Wales. It was not so much that there were major changes in policy and practice, despite the advent of the State Committee in principle in 1980. It was more that it had become possible to debate issues of accountability, resources, rationalisation, overlap with other services and relationships with government. Increasing costs and higher levels of demand for MOW, fuelled in part by earlier discharge of patients from hospital, had made the service more visible and more central. In contrast, in earlier periods, discussion had focussed on technical matters such as rostering techniques or better equipment rather than faced up to the bigger strategic issues.

What is less apparent is whether the discussion about these bigger issues was filtering through to those local administrators and local volunteers who were not regularly involved in the broader debate. The agenda was changing, but the large numbers of regular helpers and supporters were not necessarily aware of, let alone influencing, the agenda items. The voting outcome at the July 1980 conference perhaps symbolised this. Indeed, it is difficult to see through what mechanisms, except an endless round of local visits by the MOW consultant following her appointment in 1978, it would be possible to disseminate new ideas about the service (whether generated at local, State or inter-State level); and, more challengingly, to address new ideas about the role of the volunteer, ideas that suggested that such a role could no longer be regarded as sacrosanct, but should be as open to critical examination as any other part of public service, interpreted as service to the public.

Although various studies have been undertaken on the role of the volunteer in Australia, it is still a matter of doubt whether they have yet had any impact on the debate about the future structure and staffing of the MOW service. Problem identification - shortage of volunteers - is easier to discern than problem resolution - looking in new quarters for volunteers, whose motives may be different from the traditional sources of recruitment. The management students at the Seaforth College of Technical and Further Education found in their recent survey of MOW organisers a general reluctance to use as volunteers unemployed people or those required to perform community service work following a minor misdemeanour. This is not to suggest that such non-traditional sources for volunteers are good or bad. The issue is whether these and similar ideas have been actively addressed, rather than summarily dismissed.

Another feature of the second half of the 1970s was the closer engagement of the State government in one form or another in the debate about community services in general, and meals on wheels in particular. This was in part due to shifts in health, or rather hospital, policy to encourage as much care in the community as possible, but was also fuelled by a sense of the large scale of the task in the context of scarce resources. This enabled a Labor State government to accuse the Federal government of heartlessness and parsimoniousness in its attempts to reduce the level of public expenditure.

The interest groups also ensured that issues about services for elderly people, including delivered meals, were regularly brought to the attention of State Ministers and officials, in particular the Department of Youth and Community Services, with its more activist profile than, for instance, the Health Commission, where it was believed in some quarters that the services were doctor - dominated, which made changes in community care difficult, except on their terms. The debate however,

tended to be conducted - at least in the published reports - in terms of principles rather than concrete proposals for action.

At the Commonwealth level, the "new federalism" meant minimal action. Apart from a belated rise in the level of subsidy in late 1980, the main Federal contribution was to issue (from the Commonwealth Department of Health) the first edition of a booklet on nutritional guidance in 1975. Otherwise, the Federal Government in the second half of the 1970s was content that its modest level of subsidy supported a modest service that would continue to be supported by volunteers, many of whom were its supporters.

PART IV: 1981-1983

Not surprisingly, in view of its genesis, the State MOW Committee, officially a sub-committee of the Council on the Ageing began its work rather quietly, in March 1981, to coordinate and disseminate advice to administrators of local MOW services. Its parent body produced in October 1981 the long awaited results of its survey, jointly with the State office of the Department of Social Security, on home care services for elderly people in New South Wales. A decision in principle had been taken as early as 1975 to undertake the survey, but the fieldwork was not carried out until 1978-79, and at least another two years passed before publication.

Whether the results were all that helpful could be a matter of some debate, particularly because of poor response rates from some services. For instance under half (17) of the 37 MOW services in the metropolitan area responded, yet the intention of the survey was in part to map the location, scope and extent of home care services for elderly people in the State. It is, however, worth noting in passing that about two-thirds of the MOW services responding had no paid staff at all.

Perhaps the most important feature of this survey was the symbolic joint expression of concern to remedy a lack of information by both a non-statutory organisation concerned to improve the lot of elderly people and a Federal government department responsible for funding a range of services, including delivered meals, of high relevance to frail and infirm people. Rather than spending a long period developing a patchy picture of the services at one point in time, it might have been worth devoting energy on creating an information feedback system, so that changes in service profiles could be seen over time.

The report did state that more systematic review of service delivery was required, together with other familiar conclusions such as lack of co-ordination between services, the importance of sharing up to date information about services in the locality of operation, and the need to provide training and development opportunities for volunteer staff, though it was not clear whether volunteers would want this, at least in the MOW service.

Yet another non-government body had become concerned about the adequacy of community services in recent years. In November 1981 the Home Support Services Committee of the Council of Social Service of NSW published a crisis report, called Rockbottom. This Committee included active members from YACS. Much of the message was based on another report put together earlier in the year on service deliverers' perceptions of the effects of the initial 1980-81 State budget allocations to home support services. This earlier report was equally dramatically called Sink or Swim.

The impact of the recession had reduced the State government's initial allocation of funds to the home help service and had led to severe limits to the level of funding in both State and Federal budgets for the home nursing service, causing general alarm. Nobody has ever commented that the Federal delivered meal subsidy is open-ended, presumably because the total sum of money involved is insignificant (less than \$1¼ million dollars in New South Wales for 1981-82 for well over 200 services) and the way the service is currently organised, with the inbuilt rationing device of high dependence on volunteers who are said to be in short supply, is unlikely to unleash a huge growth in demand.

The Rockbottom report painted a distressing picture of falling standards, rejection of applicants to services, manipulated waiting lists and low morale. Funding priorities needed to be examined, and assessment and rehabilitation services were sorely needed. Specifically on meals on wheels, increasing strain was reported "on this hard-pressed volunteer-based service" with serious shortages of volunteers, particularly in low income areas and in rural localities where petrol costs affected willingness to become involved. One consequence was that workers in other home support services were using some of their time in the preparation of meals. In some inner city areas, volunteers were being paid to avoid this situation. The Commonwealth subsidy had not kept pace with costs, and the pressure on hospitals was leading to further limitations on the supply of meals.

The report made a plea that this volunteer-based service should not continue to follow traditional practices, such as dependence on medical recommendations, and become ossified, thereby limiting a service which should be seen as a right that individuals could claim in order to sustain their independence in their own home. Like earlier official reports, a more cogent case was put forward on what was needed rather than on how it could be achieved, though extensions to and increase in the level of subsidy were obvious demands.

The case made out in the Rockbottom report had been based in large part on the results of a self-administered survey of deliverers of home support services in the State. They were asked to comment on the likely effects of the shortfall in home help service funds in the 1980-81 budget, the freeze on home nursing services, and the minimal funds available to MOW.

Detailed scrutiny of the survey returns showed a lower response rate from MOW deliverers (30 per cent) than from home nursing (33 per cent) and home help service deliverers (52 per cent). Close examination also revealed that those involved with the MOW service were less likely to see adverse effects of cutbacks in funding than

were those involved in the other two home support services. Indeed, nearly half of the MOW deliverers stated that the minimal funding of the service had no adverse effect on either the consumer or the service, though the report pointed out that opinions had been collected before the major hospital cutbacks had occurred, and therefore they may at the time have felt less affected by resource constraints than the deliverers of home nursing or home help services. Nevertheless, the response is consistent with a traditional localist view of autonomy, minimal dependence on government, a belief in as little government as possible, and therefore support for the approach and policies of the then Federal government.

One of the criticisms by bodies such as the Council of Social Service of NSW or the State Council on the Ageing was that many people were unaware of the existence and availability of a range of services for old and infirm people needing help in their own homes. The main implication of this comment was that more should be done at local level by the local branches of the various home support services and by local government authorities.

There has been some recent academic study of awareness on the part of elderly people (or those caring for them) of these community services. In a study of a large sample of elderly people in Sydney in 1981 it was found that the MOW service was the most commonly known, being mentioned by 43 per cent of respondents.

In a 1981-83 study of 158 individuals caring for handicapped elderly people in Sydney, Adelaide and Hobart, nearly 80 per cent of those replying said that they had heard of meals on wheels. This latter point is thought provoking, indicating, as it does, that a fifth of people caring for a highly dependent elderly person and who had been contacted through a local branch of the home nursing service, had not heard of the MOW service.

This, together with the conclusions of the 1981 Sydney study, showing that substantially less than half of older people living in the community had heard of the service, suggests not only that more effective local publicity is required (the absence of which may be a rationing device to control the level of demand) but that there may be considerable unmet need for delivered meals, including providing relief for hard pressed carers.

The measurement of unmet need is often a hazardous and controversial task. But it was addressed in 1982 under the joint auspices of YACS and the Home Support Services Committee of the Council of Social Service of NSW. The State Department was building on earlier statements of principle by trying to indicate the size of the gaps between supply, demand and need and to show that it was responsive to the examination in the 1981 crisis reports from the Council of Social Service of the

difficulties being grappled with in the home help, home nursing and MOW services. Through discussions in groups and refinement in argument, estimates of minimum adequate levels of home support services were agreed in October 1982.

The assumptions on which the calculations were based can always be open to query, but the importance of this development was that specific target figures replaced, or perhaps embellished, the earlier general statements of principle. In political terms, it became possible to see what the resource, and possibly organisational, consequences of a strategy of development might be, and what constraints would have to be overcome.

In summary, it was stated that there were about 37,000 handicapped people (in terms of self-care) in the State living alone or only with other handicapped people, and 74,500 such handicapped people living with others whom, it was assumed, could care for them. The former group were assumed to need an intensive service, and the latter a supportive service.

In terms of meals on wheels, it was assumed that those in the former group were not able to prepare a meal and required a range of 14 to 21 meals a week (average 17.18), and the latter required a range of 0.5 to 5 meals a week (average 1.00). The average figures were applied to the two populations as follows:

(1) Intensive level of service (17.18) for 37,000 people	635,660 meals per week
(2) Supportive level of service (1.00) for 74,500 people =	74,500 meals per week
Total:	710,160 meals per week

In late 1982, the 235 services in the State were providing an estimated 55,000 meals per week both in centres and at people's homes. This was 7.7 per cent of the calculated level of support required. Only three services were providing any form of seven day a week service in the State, and for practically all services, only one meal a day was provided.

In their recent survey, already referred to, the management students at the Seaforth College of Technical and Further Education had reported that three-quarters of the administrators of the 22 metropolitan MOW services who participated in their study had said there was no restriction on their service. Such is the gap between the results of using needs indicators and relying on the reports of practitioners in the field, whose recognition of current need would be based on the level of unmet expressed demand.

Both the Seaforth students' reports of the views of MOW administrators and the calculations by YACS of the need for meals on wheels (over 700,000 per week needed

compared with an estimated 55,000 delivered to both centres and homes) can be contrasted with the figures produced in August 1983 in an interim report of the NSW Geriatric Rehabilitation Planning Committee. An optimum figure of 1,500 meals per week per 10,000 people aged 65 or over was estimated by using data from areas where there was strong emphasis on comprehensive, community health services. With a State population aged 65 or over of about 500,000 people, the number of meals on wheels needed per week would be in the order of 75,000, still more than the total of 55,000 being delivered, but not much over a tenth of the calculation in the "Unmet Needs" paper.

This paper also commented on the Commonwealth subsidy. First, the Vitamin C supplement allowance of 5 cents, introduced in 1972, had never been increased and in 1982 was about 11 per cent of the total subsidy compared with 25 per cent, when it was introduced.

Second, although matching State funds were not required for the MOW service, an extensive informal subsidy had developed through the preparation of meals in hospital kitchens. 50 per cent of meals were cooked in hospitals for over 70 per cent of services in the State. The charge was on a cost of ingredient basis only. Nothing had come of attempts to include the preparation of delivered meals in hospital budgeting arrangements at the national level. With increasing pressure on hospital finances, limits to or reductions in this service had occurred with the result that local government authorities were providing ever increasing subsidies to maintain the viability of those services which had reduced or no access to hospital - produced meals.

Third, the level of subsidy (then 40 (or 45) cents) did not reflect the actual cost of providing the service (calculated by the authors of the "Unmet Needs" paper to be \$3.01). Indeed, the amount had fallen below the one-third of the material cost of the meals (\$1.54 was the figure for meal preparation costs) which the Minister for Social Services had said, in introducing the legislation in 1970, he had had in mind as an appropriate level of subsidy, bearing in mind the volunteer effort, and the charge levied for the meals. The linking of the subsidy to the cost of the meal rather than the cost of the service has meant that no recognised incentive has existed to develop a better service in terms of equipment (despite the provisions of the States Grant (Home Care) Act 1969), assessment, training, publicity and working relationship with other services. The focus has thus been on the preparation and delivery of meals rather than a wider concern, and this may well have suited the volunteers or co-ordinators involved, or, more subtly, may have attracted to the service those for whom this narrowly defined activity was what they were seeking.

Fourth, the subsidy was limited to hot meals (or a salad in summer), so that frozen or chilled meals delivered to the recipient in that form, were not eligible for Commonwealth funding, unless specially approved by the Department of Social Security. This reduced the opportunity for trying out new ideas, though it is far from clear that there would be great support among administrators and volunteers for testing the feasibility of different ways of providing the service. Judgments are made by some MOW organisers about the capability of recipients to use frozen or chilled meals properly, which did not seem to be based on any consultation with recipients. Yet in a study by the Hospital Planning Advisory Centre, funded by the State Health Commission, of a pre-cooked chilled home-delivered meals service in the Municipality of Bankstown, it was reported that the recipients indicated a clear preference for chilled meals - 62 per cent preferred them, 17 per cent preferred the meals delivered hot, and 21 per cent had no preferences. The established outlook, rooted in past practice, of those involved in the supply and organisation of meals on wheels in some areas produces a more vivid image of nineteenth century charity than of being part of a responsive and innovative multi-faceted health promotion and social support programme.

The fifth, and final, comment on the Commonwealth subsidy was that the system of direct funding to local, independent services, without any guidelines or controls, had resulted in large differences in systems of administration, range and quality of provision, and charges levied. The implication was that the price of continued support for localism and independence was too great in terms of fairness to those in need, and therefore, without sacrificing the beneficial side of a locally provided and supported services, some guidelines - linked to an improved subsidy system - to reduce the disparities between services was required.

A specific proposal for the reorganisation of the structure of the MOW service was put forward within YACS in May 1983, taking further the engagement at State level in the future of a service for which it had had no formal responsibilities. The case was prefaced by the by now familiar arguments about the inadequacy and inequity of the service in New South Wales, the low level of per capita spending on meals on wheels compared with most of the other States in Australia, the limited coverage of the Commonwealth subsidy, the lack of mechanisms for evaluation of the service, and lack of liaison with other support services.

The preferred model of reorganisation in the Departmental paper was described as a pilot project, and the proposed structure was modelled on but was also separate from the Home Care Service of New South Wales, with its Executive Committee and Headquarters staff. The proposal required the Commonwealth Department of Social Security to commit funds beyond the current meals-only subsidy to include provision

for capital and running costs of approved programmes, a recommendation that could be implemented under existing legislation.

The State government, through YACS with its experience of funding community based projects, would administer the project. If proposals of the kind discussed since the mid-1970s to amalgamate various community services into a single programme were enacted, the proposed structure of the pilot project would be compatible with such a merger. With Commonwealth funds being routed through YACS, there would need to be a Meals on Wheels Management Committee, directly responsible to the Minister for Youth and Community Services, supported by an administration team which would develop the pilot programme in liaison with local MOW services.

If introduced, it is clear that this would reverse, or at least challenge, the decision taken at the July 1980 MOW Conference that a State committee should not be associated with the Minister for or Department of Youth and Community Services.

The existing State Committee, under the auspices of the NSW Council on the Ageing has meanwhile developed its activities very cautiously and modestly, both because of very slim resources and an awareness of the delicacy of its relationship with local services. Because of the small size of its budget, the Committee has requested contributions from individual MOW services, and appeals have been made to commercial companies whose products are used in the service e.g. petrol and aluminium foil.

Since its inception, the State Committee has published a general document about meals on wheels, started a regular newsletter in 1983, and produced several advisory or guideline documents, on such themes as assessment, information for clients, Vitamin C supplement, and information for workers. These documents have tended to indicate a relatively traditional view of the service, because they reflect, in broad terms, the existing nature of the service. For instance, recruitment of volunteers was described as being through churches, service clubs, sporting clubs and voluntary organisations, with little or no discussion of less traditional sources, despite the reported shortage of supply of volunteers. The service was described in one document as ideal if available on a daily basis. There was no debate about the needs of the very highly dependent for more than one meal a day. One document referred to the myth, so insulting to many devoted carers, of organised and regular assistance contributing to the breakdown of existing family, neighbourly or community support.

Broadly, the State Committee has tended to reflect long term continuities rather than be a source of innovative ideas to local services, but perhaps it needs to win the trust of those local services before it can usefully begin to communicate suggestions about new ways of working and new kinds of relationships with other community services.

Whether it will be given the time to develop that trust remains in doubt, because change is undoubtedly in the wind. Following earlier official reports on services for elderly people, in 1980 the Standing Committee on Expenditure of the House of Representatives set up a sub-committee to examine both accommodation and home care for elderly people. Its findings, known generally as the McLeay Report after the chairman of the sub-committee, were published in October 1982 and, like its predecessors, recommended that domiciliary services and benefits including delivered meals, should be merged into what it called an Extended Care Program.

Being a report from the Expenditure Committee, sitting during a period of recession and responsible to a Parliament in which the coalition provided a majority concerned to reduce the level of public spending, it did not suggest additional public expenditure on health and welfare services, but pointed out that substantial reallocation of resources to services for frail and elderly people may be appropriate.

The comments of the McLeay Report on the MOW service seemed to reflect the views of YACS in New South Wales, insofar as the only specific references to evidence submitted were to the views of that Department, which have already been outlined. The links between the Department and the Council of Social Service in NSW, as shown in the concern about the consequences of and responses to cutbacks in the initial 1980-81 State budget allocation, would be likely to ensure that the contributions by both organisations to the McLeay Committee would be compatible. In addition, the concern for the development of home care services specifically for elderly people on the part of the NSW Council on the Ageing would again suggest a strong likelihood of mutual reinforcement of key points to the McLeay Committee.

The State MOW Committee did not offer a submission independently to the Committee. Indeed, not one of the 221 submissions came from an organisation specifically and predominantly concerned with the MOW services. If evidence can be proffered by the co-ordinator of the home help service in Townsville (Queensland) or the aged care officer, City of Salisbury (South Australia), or the social worker, aged persons support service, Claremont Community Health Centre (Western Australia), why not by an administrator of a meals on wheels service?

It is problematic to explain why something did not happen, but a plausible, if partial, account could be associated with the idea of "traditional localism" - that most of those concerned with meals on wheels take a local rather than a synoptic view, and what they see is by and large satisfactory, so why engage in debate about possible alternatives to the present system?

Some of the broader recommendations in the McLeay Report may not necessarily have been completely to the liking either of YACS, the NSW Council on the Ageing, or the Council of Social Service of NSW. For instance, it suggested not only that all programmes providing home care and accommodation for frail, elderly people be brought under the control of one Minister at Federal level, but argued that on balance the appropriate Minister was Health.

It was also heavily influenced by the evidence of the Commonwealth Department of Health in arguing for increasing the availability and importance of assessment services, and noted the views of the Department of Social Security that a relatively small assessment team, based in a local health system and under the control of the appropriate health authority, could determine the needs of individuals and route them to the services they required. The concern of others might be that this could lead to a hospital-based medical dominance of the assessment process.

The proposal to transfer the total responsibility for these services to the States over a five year period with their funding eventually being absorbed within taxsharing arrangements between the Commonwealth and the States could imply that the likely responsible department in New South Wales would be Health (recently transformed from a Commission into a Department), rather than YACS.

Finally, the McLeay Report also recommended the creation within the Prime Minister's portfolio of an Office of Care for the Aged to advise on policy in respect of elderly people among all relevant Commonwealth agencies. In accepting this recommendation, the Hawke Government decided that the main support for the Prime Minister should come from the Minister of Health and his department.

At State level, the Health Commission (now Department) has been indirectly subsidising the MOW service through funding the position of the MOW consultant within the Council on the Ageing, allowing the preparation of food in hospital kitchens on a "cost of ingredient" basis, and promoting the idea of workers focussing on the needs of elderly people in community health centres. YACS has not funded any aspect of the meals service except to provide modest sums towards the cost of conferences and in general to provide financial underpinning for the work of the State Council on the Ageing.

District officers are being appointed in YACS with general responsibility for the development of services for elderly people. They will link in with locally based community and social workers operating in local government and other settings. Programme officers concerned with the promotion of policies addressing the needs of frail, older people have also been appointed to work from YACS headquarters. Their function of policy planning could possibly overlap with that of those appointed to

work in the Office of Aged Services being established within the Premier's Department. This development can be interpreted either as following at State level the recommendation of the McLeay Report or as a piece of high symbolism to express publicly the concern of the State Government for the wellbeing of its elderly citizens.

Thus there is a lot of movement, a certain amount of tension, but still little by way of implementation. The State MOW Committee, while acting very cautiously in its links with local services, has begun to be bolder in addressing government in order to ensure that its views are known before final decisions are taken.

In a submission to the Federal Minister for Social Security in July 1983, the State Committee reiterated the points that the Commonwealth subsidy was unduly restrictive, the level of subsidy was inadequate and hospital economy measures were having a serious impact on the service. It argued that meals on wheels should be included in hospital budget arrangements at the national level, and while welcoming the idea of the Extended Care Program, as recommended in the McLeay Report, drew attention to the need for adequate, fair, and earmarked funding, the importance of local government involvement, and the crucial presence in the proposed assessment teams of community representatives, so that the teams would not comprise only professionals "who have not had practical experience in the field".

The submission also recommended the appointment of liaison officers to investigate the special needs of some elderly migrants for meals on wheels. Few services catered for or were concerned about special needs, though some in Sydney were buying frozen ethnic meals prepared in a hospital kitchen. Finally, the submission made the point that if the need was there, the service should be available on seven days a week, not just between Mondays and Fridays.

By the middle of 1983, there were 238 meals on wheels services in New South Wales, 37 in the metropolitan area and 201 country services. The amount of Commonwealth subsidy had increased nearly twenty fold from \$63,144 in 1969-70 to \$1,227,056 in 1981-82. The level of subsidy was increased again in the 17 August 1982 budget statement to 50 (or 55) cents in respect of meals provided from October 1982.

A profile of the MOW service in the first half of 1983 in New South Wales was provided in September 1983 by the State office of the Federal Department of Social Security for the State Department of Environment and Planning (DEP). State environmental planning policy required the DEP to advise local government authorities that planning consent could - and usually should - be given for the development of retirement villages or other similar accommodation projects, providing an assessment had been made that adequate support services, including meals on wheels, were available.

Information on MOW services was therefore requested from the Department of Social Security to aid the preparation by the DEP of a Guidelines on Support Services report. Some local authorities said that they did not know how to assess support services, or were making negative assessments, causing concern in DEP, as the promotion of accommodation suitable for older people formed part of its strategy of urban consolidation.

The Department of Social Security extracted from its files figures for meals per quarter for all the subsidised services in the State. 240 services were getting a Commonwealth subsidy, and the average number of meals provided per quarter in the first two quarters of 1983 was calculated. The State total on this basis was 721,128 meals per quarter. There was no subsidised service in 20 local government areas, and three new services recognised for subsidy had not begun to provide meals in the first half of 1983.

Of the 237 subsidised services in operation, 103 served less than a thousand meals in a quarter and another 47 served between one and two thousand meals. The bulk of the services operated on a very modest scale. There were 18 services providing ten thousand or more meals per quarter, all, not surprisingly, in Sydney except for the Newcastle service, and including those, such as City of Sydney and Marrickville, directly provided by local government.

The Advisory Council for Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) took a particular interest in the role of local government in the MOW service in its 1983 report on the provision of services for elderly people. It did not undertake, or at least publish, examination of the extent of local government involvement in delivered meals State by State. The national picture, however, showed that the proportion of MOW services run by local government authorities has remained constant since the inception of the subsidy, but the proportion of meals delivered by local government rose from a quarter to nearly two-fifths of the total. However, this latter proportion varied between metropolitan and country areas, with the former providing over 40 per cent compared with less than 20 per cent in country areas.

The ACIR opinion on programme amalgamation might be of considerable interest to YACS in comparison with the proposals of the McLeay Report, as it suggested a division between health care programmes that provide services in institutions and homes that are related to specific assessed health needs, and community support programmes (including meals on wheels) that provide services related to the social support of frail, elderly people to enable them to maintain largely independent lives in their own localities.

The Commonwealth Department of Social Security had not been unaffected by all this activity at State and Federal level. It too arranged for an investigation into the delivered meals service, which was undertaken in the first half of 1982, through visits or questionnaires to 56 individual services (mainly in Western Australia, as the study was undertaken by an official based at the Perth office of the Department of Social Security, but also including Victoria and New South Wales), and discussions with staff of State government departments, peak voluntary organisations and officials in different State offices of the Department of Social Security. Documentary material was examined in respect of services in Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania.

The report divided MOW services into two groups, those obtaining and delivering hospital-prepared meals, and those which used their own or other organisations' kitchens. Broadly, the former had surplus funds, obtained good community support, were predominantly located in country areas, and were satisfied with current levels of subsidy and payment arrangements. The latter had to face much higher costs and the variation in responses to this situation produced wide disparities in the financial circumstances of the different organisations. As a group, services in this category tended to experience financial difficulties, and favoured an increase in the rate of subsidy, and linkage of the rate to movements in the consumer price index. Some of the services with severe financial deficits believed that the funding method itself was inequitable, giving benefits to those in surplus and yet not aiding those in serious difficulties. However, there was no suggestion that the State health authority should revise its charging policy to cover labour and other overhead costs to those MOW services obtaining hospital-prepared meals.

The report both recommended an increase in the level of subsidy to 55 cents without Vitamin C supplement, and 65 cents with the supplement, and argued that the total sum payable to an individual service should be based on the need for subsidy as demonstrated by quarterly submitted details of income and expenditure, together with the quarterly return on meals provided. This method of payment would aid those services requiring assistance because of higher costs but would not allow other services to accumulate surplus funds, at least from the subsidy. It was also pointed out that quarterly income and expenditure statements would make organisations more costs conscious.

Several services, it was reported, were in financial jeopardy because they had held the charges for meals too low for too long, and found difficulties in eventually making the necessary increases, and overall there was a lack of policy on meal prices, except in some instances where it was decided that charges should not be too far out of line with neighbouring services, or in other instances where local authority run

services levied charges at a very low level, supported by rate funds, because it was argued that that was what the local community expected and wanted.

Generally, MOW services did not follow a discipline of regular reassessment of production costs, charges, subsidy and their overall financial situation, though, of course, there were exceptions. Perhaps this reflected the non-interventionist philosophy of the Commonwealth Department of Social Security itself - 42 per cent of the services in New South Wales had not been formally contacted by the Department since 1978 - yet suggestions were put forward by individuals in all three of the States participating in the study that the Department should adopt a more positive advice and guidance role to individual services to promote better operating systems and techniques of financial management. The cry seemed to be for more uniformity, while maintaining organisational independence.

The report came to the judgment that any attempt, from Commonwealth or State level, to introduce a quick change to a uniform system would meet considerable resistance, but an initiative to provide for the equalisation of meal charges and standards of service would be acceptable if the funding base was adequate and autonomy was retained by individual services. Even this judgment may have been optimistic, as the study probably relied on comments from those individuals concerned to identify ways of ameliorating the problems they were facing rather than those who felt that the best possible service was, in the prevailing circumstances, being provided.

One change that was clearly required was a better information base in the State offices of the Department in order to extract and collate data on individual subsidised MOW services. A computerised management information system would be valuable in terms of getting reasonably up to date details about particular organisations and for undertaking reviews of particular aspects of the service, especially finance. The report complained that "throughout the survey difficulties were experienced in obtaining relevant facts and figures from records held on organisations in Departmental offices".

In mid-1983 the Sydney office of the Department of Social Security - following consultations with the NSW Council on the Ageing - distributed a two-page questionnaire to all subsidised meals on wheels services in the State. This was described as an aid towards setting up an on line information system on the service, which was a pilot for an eventual national system. The fragmented nature of the organisation of delivered meals in New South Wales made it particularly appropriate to begin the development of the system there rather than in other States. But a system is only as good as the quality and quantity of the information it receives. Replies from a number of services were still awaited towards the end of 1983, and it was unclear that the purpose of the exercise had been clearly explained in terms of any advantages it might bring to local services.

### Commentary

What conclusions can be drawn about this recent period, 1981 to 1983? Clearly, there was a great deal of activity, and this activity spread beyond the concerns of the organisations and departments immediately involved in community services for frail, elderly people. Both the Advisory Council for Intergovernmental Relations and the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Expenditure had decided that the needs of and services for older people demanded attention and examination. All this activity has created a sense of imminent change, either in financial arrangements, organisational structure, systems of accountability, or staffing policy for home support services in general, and for the MOW service in particular.

However, the impression is gained that the delivered meals service is bobbing along in the wake of the other main community services, home care and home nursing. On the one hand, the MOW service does seem to be more widely known than the other services (though publicity could clearly be improved), but on the other hand seems less concerned to address the arguments for change. Deliverers of meals seemed less worried about inadequate resources than their counterparts in the home help and home nursing services, according to the Sink or Swim report, and no MOW organisation, large or small, made a separate submission to the McLeay Committee.

Change is in the wind partly because the debate on community services for frail, elderly people has moved from expressions of principled opinion by particular bodies, either at State or Commonwealth level, which characterised the second half of the 1970s, to relatively particular suggestions for reform or change, often advocated jointly by non-statutory organisations and a government department in a single report.

In particular, the close relationship between YACS and State peak voluntary organisations such as the Council of Social Service and the Council on the Ageing is particularly marked in relation to home support services in general, yet the level of practical support it provides specifically for the MOW services is substantially less than that provided through the State Department of Health.

But the extent of action is still modest. At Federal level this may be partly explained by the change of government in March 1983, which was anxious to proceed cautiously in the early months of its period of office. The ideas of the McLeay Report have been received sympathetically, and some modest extra funding was announced in August 1983 to improve assessment procedures, to give more support to care in hostels, and to establish an enquiry and information services for elderly people in the State offices of the Commonwealth Department of Health. But by the end of 1983, the major decisions on the McLeay recommendations still had to be taken, unless non-decision making proves to be the response to McLeay, as it has been to earlier reports on services for and needs of frail, older people.

At State level in New South Wales, the case for change in the philosophy, management style and cost structures of the home support services in face of high levels of unmet need has been argued in a number of recent reports. The creation of the Office of Aged Services in the Premier's Department, plus increased funding for the home care service and to improve library services for elderly people, was announced in September 1983.

In terms of the MOW service, the future at the end of 1983 remained uncertain. There were signs of greater involvement in the purpose and nature of the service at Commonwealth level, rather than simply being an administrative device for paying small sums of money every quarter to a large number of local organisations. There were arguments for reorganisation and State involvement in the financial distribution and control system at the level of the NSW government. The peak organisations shared this concern for change in view of the inadequate resources available to sustain the quality of life for frail, elderly people. Yet there was satisfaction at the quality and quantity of the MOW service at the local level. The gap between the centre and the localities was wide, and the current bridging mechanism, the State Meals on Wheels Committee, had, and still has, a major task before it.

## REFLECTIONS

What has this brief overview of the history and development of the MOW services in New South Wales told us? The ad hoc, localist origin and orientation of the services has resulted in a very fragmented picture. The introduction of the Commonwealth subsidy in 1970 did not markedly affect this pattern. The level of the subsidy, geared to a proportion of the cost of the meals only, has meant that the Commonwealth funding has been extremely inadequate for many services. The token contribution to total costs was reflected in lack of controls over, perhaps lack of interest in, the service by the Department of Social Security. Over time, the level of donations from the general public has fallen, although the need for finance, particularly for MOW organisations not served by hospital kitchens has grown, resulting in increasing financial support for the service or direct provision of meals by local government authorities.

Overall, all three levels of government, peak voluntary organisations in New South Wales, and something in the order of 250 local services are involved in the MOW service in the State. This raises the twin issues of: Who is currently responsible to whom for the planning, organisation and delivery of the service? and: Who should be responsible? Part of the difficulty in introducing changes in response to the changing environment is due to this ambiguity. It is unclear who should or could take a lead, so any suggestions from one quarter may be received with scepticism in other quarters. Nevertheless, a key decision is required on the future responsibility for the service.

Should it be part of the role of the Council on the Ageing, even though not all of the recipients of the service are elderly people? Should a State Government department take the lead? If so, should it be the Department of Health or YACS? What, in any case, would be the consequences of formal State responsibility? Would the volunteer-based nature of the service be transformed? If so, would this be harmful or not to recipients of meals on wheels?

Alternatively, should the distinctive, charitable and local origin of the service be recognised as making MOW different from other domiciliary services such as home care and home nursing, such that changes are both difficult to implement at the local level, and impossible from any other level? Should therefore the focus remain at the local level where lines of accountability may be unclear, and management committees appear to be responsible only to themselves?

These questions will not conveniently disappear. The agenda created by the plethora of official and non-official reports on the needs of and appropriate services to offer to frail, elderly people will ensure this, particularly as the arguments are fuelled by considerations of public expenditure. Perhaps this is a useful climate in which the Commonwealth could suggest some initiatives.

It could point out that support for MOW service development can be provided through the States Grant (Home Care) Act 1969. It would still be up to State level organisations to respond to this by tapping resources available through existing legislation other than the narrow and inadequate subsidy system provided by the Delivered Meals Subsidy Act 1970. But if the quiescence of the Federal Department of Social Security were to be exchanged for a concern for improving the effectiveness of MOW services, this could also have an impact on the style of managing the services at the local level.

The Commonwealth Department of Social Security has already acknowledged that its information base on MOW is inadequate. Lack of useful information may be one of the factors resulting in lack of change, and the responsibility for this cannot lie at the local level. As well as developing the kind of on-line system described earlier, the Federal Department of Social Security, in consultation with State government and peak voluntary organisations, could develop a programme of studies to obtain a better understanding of the MOW service, and thereby to identify feasible ways of improving both the extent and quality of the service.

Six possible themes for examination are outlined here. There are no doubt others, just as important.

First, each and every report on community services for frail, elderly people has called for better co-ordination, usually without suggesting very precise mechanisms on how this might be brought about, or at what level it was most important to promote cooperative activity. Should formal machinery be established at the local level? If so, under whose auspices? Could it be brought about without administrative anguish? Or is an informal network of communication adequate? If so, how do we know whether it does or does not exist and work satisfactorily at present? A study of a number of local services geared to the needs of older people, and the links between the different services and organisations could both indicate the extent or lack of existing methods of co-ordination, and might reveal models of good practice. Is it the case that the MOW service is isolated from other home care services? Or is this a fair comment for some areas, but not for others? It could be argued that as a food service, it would not need very close links with other caring organisations, but as a social service it would. One such local study has been started at the Social Welfare Research Centre, University of New South Wales, but the results emerging from this work need to be compared with the picture in other similar and dissimilar areas.

Second, a sensitive way of both understanding how an organisation works and illuminating possible changes in its structure, planning system and method of service delivery is to examine the rationing devices or allocative mechanisms that it

employs. All organisations use at least some of them from time to time, whether with a conscious purpose or not. they include: (i) pricing services above the heads of some potential recipients; (ii) implying that receipt of the service is somehow a stigma; (iii) developing a procedural complexity that makes it difficult to get access to the service; (iv) creating very stringent eligibility criteria; (v) avoiding studies of need which might result in increased demand; (vi) publicising lack of resources to put off applications for the service and refusing to have a waiting list; (vii) using a waiting list as a deterrent; and (viii) severely limiting publicity on the service. Increased awareness of the use and impact of these rationing devices could help both those administering individual services and those concerned with the broader financial and planning aspects of the MOW service as a whole in NSW.

A third study reflects the particular rationing device of charging policy. The large differences between those MOW services relying on hospital-prepared meals and those using other sources have already been mentioned. A comparative study of the costs of different MOW services, together with the prices of the meals to the recipients, the existence or otherwise of a financial reserve, and including an examination of the various actual and possible sources of funding, apart from charges, could help to suggest a more coherent basis for financing the service as a whole than exists at present.

A fourth study also reflects a particular rationing device: that of pointing to lack of resources. A number of MOW services have reported a persistent lack of volunteers. At the same time, the limited amount of available evidence suggests that only certain kinds of sources are tapped to obtain volunteers. A careful examination of the potential for recruiting volunteers from non-traditional sources, and the obstacles faced by those who have tried to do this, would be of great help in improving the effectiveness of the MOW service.

Such an analysis of non-traditional sources of volunteers is closely linked with a fifth possible project theme, that of existing volunteers. Studies of the characteristics and opinions of the various kinds of volunteers in the MOW services -the organisers, the meal deliverers, and the members of the management committees - are rare. There are commentaries on volunteers in general, and convincing demonstrations that very large numbers of people each doing a small amount per week or month add up to a huge amount of service. But we do not know very much about how volunteers see the work that they do, why they opt for meals on wheels instead of, or in addition to, other voluntary activities.

In some quarters the word "charitable" is still used rather than "voluntary", with all the hints, misleading or otherwise, that such a discourse offers about the motives

for undertaking work of this kind. In the late 1970s, a very small scale study was undertaken of the experience of aging. It included information about both elderly recipients and the deliverers of meals in a prosperous North Shore Suburb of Sydney. The report of this study (to be found in Cherry Russell's book, *The Aging Experience*) posed a sharply contrasting picture to the taken for granted image of wanting to be of service to others.

There is nothing morally inappropriate about self-interest as a motive for volunteering, but a better understanding of why different kinds of volunteers do what they do, could both begin to explain the shortage in some areas and free planners and administrators from traditional images of what constitutes a suitable volunteer, or whether volunteers are always appropriate. So there is a case for both largescale and further in-depth work specifically on MOW volunteers, perhaps before some of the existing proposals for change are implemented.

The sixth study would focus on the recipients of the MOW service. There have been some local studies over time of consumer opinion, and a few have been mentioned in this paper, but there has been no major study of the characteristics and opinions of the recipients of and applicants for delivered meals in New South Wales, nor of people, such as elderly migrants, who might be expected to be potential recipients, but who have not made an application. The 1982 Department of Social Security report suggested that the whole aspect of consumer demand, service availability and coverage required researching by a responsible authority.

As ever, there is no shortage of opinions about consumers, but little hard evidence provided by them. Acknowledgement should, however, be made of the November 1983 report from the Ageing and the Family Project based at the Australian National University. This report, published by the NSW Council on the Ageing, surveyed elderly people in Sydney in 1981. It stated that meals services provided three per cent of the sample of old people with a hot meal on average on five days a week. Three quarters of the recipients were disabled, three-quarters lived alone, and more than two-thirds lived only on their pension.

It was stated in the Introduction to this paper that it has been prepared with practitioners, rather than academics, in mind. The author hopes that the suggestions for study of the MOW service in New South Wales commend themselves to practitioners, and that they would be prepared to play a part, if requested, in the planning and carrying out of projects aimed at improving the extent and quality of the service.

Suggestions for projects and studies are but one indicator that change is in the wind. There are other indications - the possibility of using more paid staff in MOW services, the likelihood of changing food technology and delivery systems, the issue of

accountability to a government providing substantial rather than token funding. Would all these factors be likely to drive away many or some of the traditional volunteers?

Perhaps it would, in part at least, depend on how the process of change was handled, as the report on the Sydney MOW service in the early 1970s suggested. If many of the existing volunteers were to remain, then the proposals for development and change, undertaken in a sensitive way, to address the apparently high levels of unmet need, could go ahead.

If many were likely to leave, would the existing and potential recipients suffer? Would a new kind of trained and paid staff operating a new kind of delivered meals service whose capital and running costs were soundly financed be able to sustain the level of service previously dependent on large numbers of traditional volunteers? Or would another possible strategy be modest changes in the technological and management effectiveness of the service, accompanied by a new kind of recruiting drive for new kinds of volunteers?

The larger question is whether the philosophy of traditional localism is so central to the MOW service in New South Wales that the efforts of those asking for serious examination of the need for change are doomed to fail? Is the "local is beautiful, and government is bad" argument, whose strength lies in the personal, but perhaps judgmental, nature of a support service, more powerful than appeals for the development of a strategy for the MOW service that is based on more effective and accountable use of scarce resources; and also based on equity, serving all who are eligible, regardless of their characteristics and circumstances, and providing the same kind of service to all whose requirements are similar?

This could prove an interesting debate at the proposed Australia-wide Meals on Wheels Conference being considered for late 1984.

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