

# Fiona Stanley THE CHILDREN'S champion

AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR FOR 2003, FIONA STANLEY HAS CHARMED US WITH HER PASSION AND INTELLIGENCE. NOW, AS THE END OF HER 12-MONTH TERM APPROACHES, SHE TALKS TO DAVID LESER ABOUT HOW SHE HAS FOUGHT TO TURN THE TIDE OF OUR SOCIETY FROM ONE WHERE ECONOMIC VALUES DOMINATE, TO ONE WHICH PLACES HUMAN VALUES – PARTICULARLY THE EARLY CARE OF CHILDREN – FIRST.

**S**OMETIMES WE GET IT RIGHT. We choose as Australian of the Year the person who best exemplifies the spirit and mood of the nation; someone who captures what is best in us, but also what it is that disturbs us, gives us sleepless nights.

For the past 12 months, Fiona Stanley has been that person. Everywhere she has gone, from the Torres Strait Islands in the north to Tasmania in the south, from her hometown of Perth, where she is as much celebrity as scientist, to the harder-to-please east coast, she has won Australians over with her shining intelligence, ebullience and vision. Children, parents, health workers, colleagues, lay people, business hard-heads, politicians, bureaucrats – everyone, it seems, responds favourably to this 57-year-old wife and mother of two, dubbed recently “the scientist with soul”.

John Howard was so impressed with her that he appointed her to his Science, Engineering and Innovation Council, and then created a special ministry portfolio to address her concerns. Former Science Minister and ALP President Barry Jones was moved to describe her as an inspiration – “an extraordinary combination of passion, commitment, scientific knowledge, integrity and negotiating skills ... a rare personality”.

So loved and respected is she that, four years ago, after being diagnosed with breast cancer, she was literally overwhelmed with cards and letters from people around the country concerned about her wellbeing. Flowers filled her room and flowed out into the hospital corridor. One Aboriginal elder travelled more than 1000km to her bedside to give her a traditional healing. Another came bearing bush medicine to help with her chemotherapy.

“It was an amazing outpouring of love,” Fiona said at the time. “Almost like having your obituary before you’re dead.”

Scientists don’t normally elicit this type of response. That’s because most of them tend to speak to the intellect rather than the heart. Fiona Stanley does both. She gives us the research, but also the human context. She provides us with the statistics, but then she gives us the story.

In this case, the story is no bedtime lullaby. Rather, it is a plot depicting a dramatically changing and troubled society, one that is impacting most obviously and negatively on our children. It’s what Fiona Stanley has called “the paradox of progress”. On the one hand, here we are at the start of a new century, with wealth and personal consumption for many on the rise, staggering technological and medical advances across the board, and yet more and more Australian children and adolescents are increasingly sick and unhappy.



PROFESSOR FIONA STANLEY blows into the room like a warm sea breeze – all flashing hazel eyes, a broad, open smile and a firm, outstretched hand. She is wearing a black suede coat over a black dress and a rose-coloured top. On her lapel, just above her heart, is a badge which says: Reconciliation: Together We’re Doing It. On her other lapel is the Companion of the Order of Australia award, which she won seven years ago for services to child health and Aboriginal health research.

Fiona Stanley is a medical practitioner, pediatrician, biostatistician, epidemiologist, fellow of the Australian Academy of Science and head of both Western Australia’s Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. She is renowned for her pioneering work on cerebral palsy, spina bifida and low-birthweight babies, has a list of honorary doctorates and degrees as long as your arm, and is also the author of three books and more than 200 published papers. ▶



Professor Fiona Stanley, 57, our 2003 Australian of the Year, a “scientist with a heart”, has lobbied tirelessly for children in this “toxic society”.

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We have decided to meet in Melbourne, home to neither of us, but the most strategic place to rendezvous given the eye-popping nature of her schedule.

Already today, she's had a breakfast meeting at the Royal Children's Hospital, followed by a meeting with directors from the Pratt Foundation and then a get-together at Melbourne University with Professor Sir Gus Nossal, one of her mentors and a former Australian of the Year himself.

On her way to meet The Weekly, she popped in to see the Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, as well as the Victorian Health Minister, Bronwyn Pike. Following our interview, she'll be meeting with a senior executive of the ANZ Bank.

Only yesterday, she was in Canberra for Citizenship Day, but also had time to meet with the Federal Minister for Children and



Fiona Stanley, wife and mother, with her younger daughter Tiffany, 23, in November last year.

## CHILDHOOD EXPOSURE TO ABUSE and less severe levels of stress can change the brain through the 'switching on' of genes which influence ... biological processes.

Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, as well as the staff of the National Museum. Last week, she was guest of honour at a symposium in Brisbane organised by Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, before heading to Sydney to talk to NSW Governor Marie Bashir. Tomorrow, she's the after-dinner speaker for a former colleague and next week she'll be home in Perth for a few days before flying off somewhere else.

"That's just typical of the week, where I try and fit as many things in as possible," she says. This year, she agrees, will be her year of sleep, but in the meantime, while she is still Australian of the Year, there is much to do. And part of this enormous workload revolves around trying to convince policy makers that it is far more cost effective to invest in the early years of a child's life rather than wait for the horrendous effects of divorce, unemployment, rapid technological change, social upheaval, child abuse or neglect to reap its ugly harvest.

Because that is exactly what we have, a "toxic society", as Fiona Stanley likes to call it, that has given rise to an epidemic of sickness and unhappiness, and increasingly profound disparities between the haves and the have-nots. Professor Stanley has the statistics to prove it.

Nearly 20 per cent of Australian teenagers now have mental health problems. Nearly a quarter of all families now rely on welfare. Suicides among 15- to 19-year-old males have quadrupled since the 1970s. Obesity has increased in

teenagers from around 10 per cent in 1985 to nearly 25 per cent today. A quarter of all children aged four and five are now overweight for their height. The number of young people aged 12 to 18 who are homeless on any given night has increased dramatically – 26,000 last year. Documented child abuse is up. So, too, is substance abuse, binge drinking, teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, juvenile crime, juvenile diabetes, low-birthweight babies, neurodevelopmental complications, asthma, serious behavioural problems and autism. The only statistic that is down is the death rate.

"Twelve-year-old children are having more and more mental health problems," she says, the concern and consternation etched into her face. "Depression, anxiety, hyperactivity, schizophrenia, right through to violent behaviour towards teachers, their peers and their parents.

"Eleven-year-olds are presenting to the NSW Government with problems not encountered before. [Some of them] are so violent they are unable to be fostered, educated, controlled.

"In the latest data coming out of the WA Education Department, they've seen a trebling almost every five years of children with quite significant behavioural problems in their first year of school. They either have to be sent home or taken out of the classroom. These children are severely disruptive, very angry ... this is five-year-olds we're talking about.

"And girls are getting these problems

almost with the same frequency as boys. That's a big change, particularly in the last 10 years."

What's needed then, she says, is a whole paradigm shift—a complete reassessment of the way society works and how it distributes wealth and provides education; how it balances family and work requirements; how it responds to environmental and social changes; and how, most crucially, it addresses the needs of young families. It is in the early childhood years – before the age of six – that the die is cast. It is at this time, Professor Stanley says, that future academic performances, high or low self-esteem, health or sickness, appropriate or inappropriate social behaviour are determined. This is when a child's brain development is most affected.

As Professor Stanley told a captive National Press Club audience last year: "Childhood exposure to abuse and less severe levels of stress can change the brain through the 'switching on' of genes which influence other biological processes which govern brain responses. This helps explain the increased rates of common disorders, such as child and adolescent behaviour problems, attention and learning difficulties, obesity and eating disorders, depression and addictive behaviours."

The solutions are not to be found in developing newer and more expensive drugs – important though they may be – but rather in intervening earlier to provide a more nurturing social environment. Early intervention programs have been shown categorically to reduce teenage arrests, pregnancies, substance abuse and a litany of other social ills. ►

Why attack the symptoms when you can tackle the causes? Why spend 90 cents in every health dollar on people who will be dead in 12 months?

Why not create better family support services, build stronger neighbourhoods and communities, provide better day-care services? These are not just Fiona Stanley's questions. These are questions more and more Australians are now wanting answered.



FIONA STANLEY GREW UP IN the bright, buoyant days of 1950s Australia, when the bush around La Perouse in Sydney served as her own personal playground, and a wooden boat built by her father served as her very own pleasure ship.

Her father, Neville Stanley, was Australia's first virologist, responsible for developing a polio vaccine in the middle of the polio epidemic of the 1950s. Her mother, Muriel MacDonald, was a creative,

Fiona's brother's, research as head of a cancer biology unit in New York.

Fiona wanted to help the world by finding out the causes of disease. To do so, she felt she needed to opt for medicine rather than science – much to her parents' initial misgivings. After gaining her degree at the University of Western Australia, she began working in that medical/social quagmire known as Aboriginal health.

What she saw appalled her, particularly the way Aboriginal children were "cured" in hospital and then sent back into the environment which had caused the problems in the first place.

One little boy, in particular, stood out. Several times he was admitted to hospital in Perth suffering from gastroenteritis, pneumonia and dehydration.

"Each time, we would perform medical miracles on him," Professor Stanley says, "and then he would be discharged back to his Western Desert camp, only to come in again. On his last admission, he died.

its kind in the country. She now had a team of eminent scientists behind her working on the multiple causes of asthma and allergy, infectious disease, birth defects, childhood death and disability, indigenous health, cancer and adolescent mental health. It was a unique, multi-disciplinary approach to prevention that rejected completely the idea of diseases springing from a single cause.

"It became increasingly obvious," she says, "as part of my research into many childhood problems that they were complex, that many of them arose in social adversity and that it was not a genetic solution nor an environmental one. This whole nature versus nurture argument is ridiculous. It is both. It is multiple genetic factors interacting with multiple environmental [and social] factors."

One of her greatest achievements was then to help set up a unique population data base which, in turn, enabled her to focus more clearly on the causes of low birthweight, birth defects and neurological disorders in children.

By the early 1990s, she'd contributed to one of the most important discoveries in childhood medical research – she'd helped show that a maternal diet rich in folic acid could prevent spina bifida in babies. Suddenly, pregnant women around the country were being urged to supplement their diets with folate.

"It was a breakthrough," says Sir Gus Nossal. "It was the first prospective study that showed folate lowered the instance of spina bifida. She was the one who nailed it down."

Within the space of a few years, the rate of spina bifida had fallen in Western Australia by one-third and, at the government's initiative, most breakfast cereals had been supplemented with the vitamin. The cost savings? An estimated \$1 million per child.

Her next stunning achievement was in the area of cerebral palsy, a disability affecting nearly 2.5 in every thousand babies born in Australia. Conventional thinking had attributed the condition to a lack of oxygen to the baby's brain during labour. Fiona's team found it was due more to profound interferences with brain development in utero, from such factors as inflammation, viruses, clotting or iodine deficiency in the mother. "I want to put Fiona up for a number of prizes in this regard," says Sir Gus Nossal, a man Fiona Stanley sees as one of her most important friends and mentors. "Her contribution to the country is enormous." ▶

## THIS WHOLE NATURE VERSUS NURTURE argument is ridiculous. It is both. It is multiple genetic factors interacting with multiple environmental [and social] factors.

talented woman who gave up her career as a teacher to raise her three children.

As a child, Fiona was fed a magical feast of literature and science – every weekend the latest and best children's books and, during the weekdays, bedtime stories about ant and bee colonies. There was no TV in the house. By the time she was five, her father had read her the *Storybook of Science* and taken her inside his laboratory to see his experiments with polio vaccines and chimpanzees.

At eight, she'd devoured – more than once – the biography of Marie Curie, as well as the life story of George Washington Carver, the first black American biochemist. Like another one of her early heroes, the Franco-German musician and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer, young Fiona Stanley decided she wanted to change the world. Her paternal grandfather had gone to Papua New Guinea in the early part of the last century as the first Australian government geologist, but had died suddenly from a large infected boil on his neck. This had become the subject of his son's, Fiona's father's, medical doctorate.

Neville Stanley had then gone on to enjoy a distinguished career as the foundation chair of microbiology at the University of Western Australia, only to be struck down, in his mid-'60s, with a rare form of leukaemia. This had become the subject of his son, Richard Stanley's,

"I thought to myself that there had to be a better way to practise medicine, by finding out the causes of disease and trying to prevent them."

In a state of near despair, Fiona left for England in the early 1970s where she was to end up finding both love and work. Love came in the shape of Geoffrey Shellam, a friend of her brother's and an immunologist who happened to be heading to London in the same direction – via Central Asia. (The two would later marry and have two daughters, Hallie and Tiffany. Geoffrey Shellam would also go on to occupy the same chair in microbiology at the University of Western Australia as Neville Stanley once had.)

Fiona answered a job advertisement for an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Finally, her work had brought her closer to a vision of medicine as a means of improving health and preventing disease.

By the late 1970s, after a stint in Washington DC as a visiting scientist, she returned to Australia to become head of child health at the Western Australian Department of Health. From there, she went on to direct the preventive medicine program at the National Health & Medical Research Council. Then, in 1989, she became founding director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, almost certainly the most prestigious institute of

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE a child. Loving parents, involved grandparents, siblings, cousins, neighbours, an entire web of relationships and community structures to support young families in those first exhausting, crucial years.

Fiona Stanley raised her two daughters with the help of half a village. "I had a full-time nanny," she says, "[but] because I could come home from work ... I breastfed both children until 10 or 11 months of age. I had a devoted mother who helped. I had an incredibly supportive husband who was more ambitious for my career than I was. I had resources ... I got lucky.

"I was having my children in the late '70s ... when the push to be the perfect woman [hadn't begun in earnest]. We had an ordinary house and I didn't care if we had the right couch and curtains. I didn't have dinner parties. I said to Geoff, 'Just



Prime Minister John Howard presents Professor Fiona Stanley with her Australian of the Year award in 2003.

## THE MAJORITY OF CHILDREN in Australia are actually coping with this toxic society, with the pressures on them. It's just that an increasing proportion aren't.

drop all the things that aren't necessary. Keep all the things that are important' – my children, my family and my work. So everything else went by the board."

Only recently, Professor Stanley was told by a young friend that she and her generation had failed as role models for younger women. Where in this corrosive, 21st-century work environment were the family-friendly policies? Where was the acceptance of paternity and maternity leave? Why were there not more work-based child-care centres? Fiona Stanley accepts the criticism, but has attempted to make amends in her own workplace.

At the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research in Perth, there is 12 weeks parental leave for both men and women; flexible working hours; links to home computers; hopes of setting up a creche ... "We all think she's divine," says her media officer, Liz Chester. "Working for her is a labour of love."

It's easy to see why. Fiona Stanley is possessed of a life force which is positively infectious. For two-and-a-half hours, she speaks non-stop, at breakneck speed, gesturing wildly, clutching her heart, holding her head, grimacing, laughing, drawing graphs, regaling her listener with all the evidence one will ever need to hear to be convinced as to why this society of ours is in trouble.

At one point, Professor Stanley actually begins to cry, so distressed is she by the fact she has to use economic rationalist arguments to convince government of

the importance of investing in early intervention programs. "This is about children," she says with a faltering voice, reaching for her handkerchief. "This is about an anguished group of parents ... as well as about an economic outcome, but the way to get through to governments, these days, is to talk about the economic bottom line. Don't we care enough about our children? I get terribly emotional about what's happening to our kids... sorry... sorry about this."

Fiona Stanley composes herself and then resumes her critique of the toxic society; of how modern medicine has failed to deal with the crisis in health and wellbeing, not only in Australia but in other developed nations, such as the United States and Canada.

"People always say to us, 'You bloody doctors, you're always looking at the negatives, not the positives'. So it's very important to say that the majority of children in Australia are actually coping with this toxic society, with the pressures on them. It's just that an increasing proportion aren't and the social disparities are increasing. And they're the two most important things that are driving my anxiety." She wants to see, therefore, a national debate, a national call to action that reverses the alarming brain drain caused by child and adolescent sickness. How do we build stronger families and communities? How do we balance work and family requirements?

How do we address the dark side of

economic reform. How do we distribute wealth more fairly? How do we ensure that all new families receive help?

We know now the interaction between a child and its parents is absolutely vital in terms of triggering appropriate brain development. "To the point," she says, "that if you don't respond to a child's crying in a loving and nurturing way, put it on the breast, change its nappy, see to its needs, talk to it, then the neuro-endochromones which are absolutely crucial to brain development don't get switched on." This is exactly what brain scans of Romanian orphans showed following the fall of the Communist regime. Their brains had been stunted by appalling neglect.

Yet, it's more than just revisiting the early childhood years. It's about taking a holistic view of a child's development.

"We've not just got to work with geneticists and environmentalists, epidemiologists and clinical scientists, but also with economists and people who understand what's happening in society. Because it's obvious that we're not going to get at this properly if we ignore the child in the family, in its community, in its world," she says.

And to that end Fiona Stanley's role as chief executive of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth is a monumental step in the right direction. Representing more than 120 peak organisations around the country, the Alliance's aim is to create a more co-ordinated response to children and young people in Australia now at risk.

Among its members is the Business Council of Australia, whom Fiona Stanley spoke to earlier this year. "I thought I'd be a lone voice talking about early childhood development," she says. "But I wasn't. About 70 per cent of the people at the [meeting] said one of the most important issues for Australia was the rise in social inequality; was the fact that prosperity hasn't delivered good outcomes for the community ... that's because there is a groundswell against the dollar just being the bottom line for everything."

Everywhere she has travelled in the past 12 months she has encountered a similar response – gratitude for raising the issues, standing ovations, widespread nods of approval. It's as if people are relieved that finally someone of repute has given voice to the collective disquiet of a nation.

What more could you ask from our outgoing Australian of the Year? Now she can perhaps catch up on some sleep. **W**