FEEDBACK ON SAPSAC’s 15th CONFERENCE AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

SAPSAC’s 15th annual national child abuse conference, that took place from 10-12 November at the CSIR, fell within South Africa’s first national disability rights awareness month from 3 Nov to 3 Dec and aptly focused on the abused child with disabilities.

Of course, we also celebrated SAPSAC hosting its 15th annual national child abuse conference and thus also SAPSAC’s 16th year of existence. As may be known to many of our members, SAPSAC was initiated by Dr Renee Potgieter in 1998, based on an American model APSAC – the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children. In chief the aim was to create a platform for exchanging know-how in both practice and theory so that we all have an improved understanding of the various roles we each play, thereby facilitating the taking of hands. This ideal is also embedded in the SAPSAC logo: United in the best interest of the children of South Africa.

This multi-disciplinary model was practically demonstrated in the presentations on the first day of the conference, dealing with a real-life case involving the sexual abuse of children, one of which is a child with cerebral palsy with no education, no language and little communication abilities, where one of the offenders was convicted and sentenced to 12 sentences of life imprisonment: this success story was due to the involvement of a really dedicated multidisciplinary team. The team comprised of the social worker and other social workers, teachers, psychologists, SAPS FCS, the prosecution, the medical doctor, the media reporting on the matter and, importantly, also the speech therapists and other professionals from the Alternative and Augmentative Communication Unit at the University of Pretoria. Due to the involvement of this latter unit, the child with cerebral palsy was empowered to communicate and to testify and her right to access to justice ensured.
Following a number of excellent presentations, the conference concluded with the following resolutions:

1. **Having noted the increased vulnerability of children with disabilities to all forms of abuse, each and everyone working in the field of child abuse should:**
   - **take heed of** the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
   - **engage** with counterparts for purposes of forming multi-disciplinary teams and inclusive partnerships so as to effectively react to reports or complaints of child abuse, the more so where the abuse involves a child with disabilities and in the latter event, take care, inter alia, to be sensitive
   - ensure that the nature and extent of the disability is assessed and determined by relevant experts so as to ensure appropriate action, management and intervention
   - **actively seek for alternative ways and means to ensure access to justice** such as empowering the abused child to communicate in the absence of speech or communication abilities
   - ensure that the work environment is accessible and accommodating and take steps to ensure appropriate placement and therapeutic intervention
   - ensure that the family unit/support system of the child is supported and empowered

2. **The truth-lie test** for purposes of establishing witness competency and testimony reliability should be abolished: it serves to exclude relevant testimonies; pending legislative amendment presiding officers to be sensitised and guided in the questioning of children.

3. **Residential care facilities** should be increased and their scope should be more focussed so as to accommodate the varying needs: the appropriate placement of persons with disabilities, whether children or adults, is complicated due to the insufficient number of places, places unsuitable given the nature of the disability and also restrictions imposed by provincial boundaries.

4. **Budgets** should provide for the reasonable accommodation of the child with disabilities: additional resources are required for inter alia expert assessments, expert medical examinations, enabling communication, enabling environment, appropriate placements, etc., where so required

5. **Training** should be provided to all professionals involved to ensure sensitive and appropriate handling, identification of abuse, identification of disabilities, use of terminology, etc. and Tertiary Institutions should include a module on persons with disabilities across the spectrum of training disciplines.

6. **Terminology** to be standardised across disciplines to ensure a common understanding

7. **To enable and facilitate the receipt and proper understanding of the testimonies** of young children and children with disabilities, presiding officers should make use of developmental and other expert assessors.

8. Role players in the criminal justice system should be assisted by relevant experts and systems such as the **SAVE model** (the Sexual Assault Victim Empowerment programme developed by the Cape Mental Health Society), providing training and services free of charge to complainants with disabilities

9. **Whilst social grants** are much needed and appreciated, measures should also be in place to ensure that inflation is reckoned with and awareness of- and access to available resources facilitated.

10. **Urgent attention to be given to the management of perpetrators with disabilities** across the spectrum of relevant disciplines to ensure appropriate intervention including holding them accountable where this is called for.

11. **The management** of children with disabilities calls for a sufficient number of experts such as educational psychologists to also identify and address causative factors, the impact of trauma to be kept in the reckoning.

12. **The acknowledgement of Forensic Nursing** as a specialist field by the Nursing Council is welcomed.
At the AGM, I indicated that I intend to step down soon, despite my being re-elected as President. Dr Sagie Naidoo kindly agreed to be co-opted as vice-President whilst Prof Rudolph Zinn, though no longer available to serve as vice-President, agreed to be co-opted in a present vacancy to the council. Sharlene Botha was re-elected as representative of Education. Amendments to the Constitution were also agreed: the immediate past-President to serve on the council and, importantly, the constitution to allow for nominations for representatives to the council to be made by individuals (and no longer by 100 members) on a prescribed pro forma, which will soon be available from the Secretary General or the SAPSAC website. Members are invited to nominate themselves or interested others to serve on the council even if there is no present vacancy- the nominations will be considered when a vacancy arises. Due notice will also be given of vacancies as soon as they arise. Also decided was that the CARSA will no longer be printed but will be accessible to members as an e-journal. Our Secretary General may be contacted for the required password.

In celebrating SAPSAC’s mile-stone achievements over 16 years, a cocktail function was held on 11 November after the business of the conference. Invitees included those SAPSAC members attending the conference, conference presenters, friends of SAPSAC and also a previous vice-President Manie Ferreira and his wife Cynthia. Unfortunately Dr Pieter du Plessis, the former Secretary General of SAPSAC and SAPSAC honorary member, and his wife Maxie were unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances.

It was indeed an excellent conference as is apparent from the conference evaluation forms, which, thanks to Dr Mdaka, a loyal SAPSAC member, have already been processed. Roughly more than 90% of attendees rated the conference on all aspects as excellent or good. Some of the remarks made: “From day 1 until the last day I gathered so much information that I will use at work. It was very informative.”, “The conference helped me learn about the challenges faced by children with disabilities. It is an area I have feared to confront.”

We welcome all new members that joined the SAPSAC family at the conference and, with 7 of these from the Lesotho judiciary, SAPSAC is now spreading its wings also to neighboring countries.

SAPSAC 16th Annual National Child Abuse Conference
19-21 August 2015
CSIR ICC, Pretoria