



Speech at the launch of the Growing Up In New Zealand report, 'Now We Are Born' Auckland

23 March 2012

I welcome the release of this progress report on [Growing Up in New Zealand](#). The project is enormously complex, and I congratulate Susan Morton and her team for the work they have done. The report contains some important and essential information about the lives of our youngest and most vulnerable New Zealanders, and there is a lot to be learnt from it.

There are two trains of thought that come to mind while reading this report.

The first is the increasing recognition that if we are to address the physical, mental and social health of our peoples, there is a need for a far better understanding of the influences at the beginning of life that have echoes throughout life.

The old duality of 'nature and nurture' and 'genes and environment' has been replaced by a much more sophisticated notion: that developmental influences affect biology, behaviour and the brain in such a way that greater or lesser resilience in many domains can be formed.

Whether we are looking at the origins of obesity and diabetes, at antisocial behaviour, problems in adolescence or at susceptibility to disease, it has become clear that a life-course and indeed an intergenerational view is needed.

While this might to some seem self-evident, what has changed is the mounting evidence of how central are these early life influences to making us what we are. This is good news, because this is a period of life when intervention is possible. But it is also difficult because this understanding creates a range of policy issues that are not necessarily easy to address. Nevertheless, we are seeing a greater focus on these issues as evidenced by the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children process.

The second thought that comes to mind arises from my role in promoting the importance of good evidence in policy formation. This is not the place to expound at length so I shall simply make three points.

Firstly, if evidence is to have a privileged role in policy formation—which I believe it must—then the evidence must be collected, analysed and interpreted by scientists in a value-free way. If it is not, then, as we have seen in other complex areas of knowledge, scientists become little more than lobbyists. The values domains such as

community values, fiscal priorities, and diplomatic and political considerations are properly those of the politicians and policy makers; scientists' views are no more valid in those domains than anybody else's.

Secondly, when we evaluate science in complex areas we must be honest about what we know, what we do not know, the extent of inference being made from the data, the likely magnitude of impact of and risks associated with any suggested policy change, the level of extrapolation and the implications of variance and uncertainty.

We are entering new phase of policy making where uncertainty rather than certainty is commonplace and has to be acknowledged, and where programmes are developed and evaluated in that context. That, of course, means greater attention to ongoing evaluation as new programmes are introduced.

And lastly, I need to point out that the nature and use of data has very different implications for the academic, the policy maker and the politician, all of whom expect and need different things from research.

In the context of these comments, the longitudinal study provides important baseline data and raises important questions. Sometimes these will challenge long-held dogma or overturn past conclusions. This is why a value-free, honest approach to data will do best by our children. It is a study of the increasingly complex milieu of social, cultural, physical and virtual worlds in which young children now grow up. The data can be used by the academic community to ask important questions regarding the nexus between biology, development and the environment, which should lead to new research questions that in turn suggest new solutions.

In the policy space it provides data that just was not there before, and does indeed challenge a number of assumptions. The policy and political process is increasingly taking into account the need for good evidence to inform decisions, and this highlights the value of well designed, well conducted studies. One of the tasks I am working on with Ministries involves looking at ways to ensure quality in the research needed to inform policy creation.

Within the context of these brief remarks, it is clear that Growing Up in New Zealand has already made an important contribution. Once again, I congratulate all those involved.

Thank you.

ENDS