

President's Report 24 November 2020

This has been a great year for VADR. So I began last year's report, and it is also true of this year; it has been a great year for VADR. That's where the similarity to last year ends, however, because it has also been a bizarre and difficult year for everyone, particularly those living in Victoria, requiring the mastery of new online skills and a great deal of flexibility on a personal and professional level.

The last face-to-face CPD we had was on 26 February, when Michelle Mead spoke about the work of the Equal Opportunity Commission. The first case of Covid had been on 25 January. By the time of Michelle's talk, a month later, there had been a total of four cases in Victoria. We were wondering whether we might have to stop face-to-face events in April. I didn't think there would be any problem with March. We were scheduled to have an all-day event in Daylesford on 21 March, as well as a workplace presentation in Melbourne to be given by visiting Queenslander, Elizabeth Rosa. I thought they would be fine. Around 10 March, when Victoria had had 18 cases, we began to get enquiries about whether Daylesford was going ahead. Elizabeth had to cancel because so many people pulled out of her training session, which was the reason for her presence in Melbourne. Within a week, we had to cancel Daylesford. We were very reluctant to do this, because we had lined up a great group of speakers, but it turned out to be the right decision, as Victoria, like most of the states, had locked down by 23 March.

Most mediators and conciliators working for the government or for organisations providing family dispute resolution then began working online from home. For some, who already provided substantial online services, it was easy to adapt, but for others, who had never worked online, the lack of the physical connection provided by face-to-face meetings, was difficult and alien. Some mediators had to home-school full time while also performing a full-time job, an extraordinarily difficult juggling act. Some of VADR's mediators in private practice had little work and decided to retire early or return to a previous profession. A surprising number of people, however, were actually much busier than they had been before the pandemic. Problems associated with Covid increased the number of workplace, building and family disputes, and disputes involving landlords and tenants. The government established the Residential Tenancy Dispute Service and other services for commercial tenants, which provided quite a bit work for some of VADR's members.

In May, VADR held its first online event when Judith O'Connell, The Victorian Small Business Commissioner, spoke about the services offered by the Commission, and how they were adapting these services during the pandemic. Elizabeth Rosa was finally able to present to us in June, although she has still not been able to hold a workshop in Melbourne; like most trainers, she eventually conducted the workshop online.

After a brief reopening of Victoria in June, during which the Committee wondered briefly whether we might be able to host the Daylesford event in September, we Victorians had to begin an even more arduous lockdown in July. This obviously did not halt VADR CPD events. In July we hosted presentations by online platform service providers Modron and Immediation, in which there was a great deal of interest. In August, following several requests from VADR members, a panel of mediators and facilitators from several areas of mediation, discussed how they were adapting their services to online and telephone mediation, and the Zoom chat function enabled a number of participants not only to ask

questions of the speakers but also to discuss how they themselves had adapted. In late August, Venita Dimos discussed strategies for enabling clients to deal with their conflict in different and more productive ways, a timely presentation, since many mediators were finding the increased levels of anger and frustration in their clients difficult to cope with.

Katherine Johnson, the President of ADR, VADR's equivalent in NSW, provided a breath of fresh air in October when she spoke about presenting Australian family mediation to Mongolians dealing with the problems of family breakdown. Shortly afterwards, the Victorian State Ombudsman, Deborah Glass, spoke about early resolution strategies being used by her office, as well as discussing how her staff had adapted their practices to cope with Victoria's restrictive lockdown provisions. Our final talk for the year was given last night when the Chair of the Mediator Standards Board, Bianca Keys, discussed the role and remit of the Mediator Standards Board, the review currently being conducted on behalf of the organisation and its future plans.

Although VADR will return to face-to-face CPD at some stage, probably after the widespread implementation of the Covid vaccine, we do intend to continue conducting some online CPD. This is because it is more equitable, making access to CPD accessible to a much greater number of members. Those members outside the Melbourne metropolitan area, even members living on the outskirts of Melbourne, have always found it very difficult to attend Melbourne-based CPD, often travelling two or more hours for one hour of CPD, which is why we instituted the annual Daylesford workshop. Interstate members have been able to participate only when visiting Melbourne. And those members with young children or parental and other commitments can be very disadvantaged by having access only to face-to-face CPD. The high Zoom attendance figures have certainly indicated that online CPD has a wide appeal, extended by the availability of recordings following events. Online CPD has the further advantage that we can draw on the services of mediators all over Australia, and even overseas, although we have not yet exercised that option. It is clear that online and face-to-face CPD, when combined, really broaden the range of CPD available to members.

In addition to our regular CPD program, the work of the Private Practitioners' Special Interest Group, ably facilitated by Ian Smith and Jodie Grant, was conducted online after the first face-to-face meeting in early March this year. As happened with the online CPD program, attendance at the Special Interest Group was about double the face-to-face meetings and worked really well. The group will continue next year.

The number of VADR members, and accredited members, has continued to rise. We now have over 400 members, including more than 100 accredited members. Anthony Grimes, who is also VADR's Secretary, chairs the Accreditation Sub-Committee, which now has to do a lot of work accrediting and re-accrediting members, as well as liaising with the Mediator Standards Board, and participating in information sessions. This large workload is voluntary, with a small amount of admin assistance, and we owe Anthony and the Accreditation Sub-Committee a lot. VADR also liaises with the Attorney-General's Department, which accredits FDRPs, who are able to use VADR's Complaints Process to comply with the requirements of that Department. We have an average of just one complaint a year, but it is a lot of work for the person investigating it, and again, we are very grateful to those who provide this time-consuming service, including Jeff Katz and Susan Hamilton-Green.

Only one Committee member, Annmaree Bowey, is standing down this year. Annmaree has been a valued member of the Committee for three years, and we thank her very much for the services she has

provided to VADR over that period and wish her well for the future. All the Committee members put in a fair few hours each year making sure that VADR runs smoothly, and the services we provide to you would not function without the work they do. A special mention needs to be made of Catherine Davies, our Treasurer, whose workload has been increasing, and Ena Shaw, our Vice-President, who has implemented a number of initiatives on behalf of VADR. Finally, I would like to thank our admin assistant, Alison, who produces the Bulletin, liaises with us, the members, and ensures the smooth running of our organization.

We have all learnt a lot this year, but I'm hoping very much that next year is going to be an easier one. We have been told that the first vaccines are likely to be administered in March, and hopefully, with or without vaccines, this pandemic may start to die down around the middle of the year. Hopefully, too, the next pandemic is a long way away. We are so lucky we live on an island and have politicians who listen to scientists, as well as a population who is largely prepared to follow the restrictions imposed. Let's hope that we are more or less able to return to a normal life, and incorporate what we have learnt into a better future.

In the meantime, Season's Greetings to all of us, and the Committee of Management wishes you a very happy and productive 2021.