

Mental deficiency

c. 1900 – c. 1969

Details

Mental deficiency is a term that was commonly used to describe intellectual or developmental disability in the first half of the twentieth century. It was regarded as a disease, and the popular belief was that people who were diagnosed as 'mentally defective' needed to be segregated from the community, to receive special 'care' and treatment. Ideas about mental deficiency impacted many children and adults in institutional 'care' in twentieth-century Australia. Classifications of mental deficiency were applied to many children in orphanages and other institutions, as well as to their family members. It should not be assumed that people labelled 'mentally deficient' were in fact intellectually or otherwise disabled.

The concept of mental deficiency was firmly based on principles of eugenics, a set of pseudo-scientific beliefs that was popular from the late nineteenth century until the mid twentieth century. Eugenics (selective breeding) emphasised the superiority of the white race and others deemed 'fit' to reproduce. It promoted state intervention to segregate and even sterilise 'unfit' people (including people with intellectual disabilities).

In 1940s Australia, some commentators, influenced by ideas of eugenics, questioned the wisdom of government initiatives like the Victorian Mental Deficiency Act 1939. For example, in 1940, AW Foster, Vice-President of the Medico-Legal Society of Victoria, declared that public funds would be better spent on improving the situation of 'slum children, who might be called economically defective'. Foster believed that investing in children with intellectual disabilities carried a supposed threat to the quality of society, and asked: 'Are we, by making mentally retarded persons into useful citizens who may propagate their kind, tending gradually to lower the intellectual standards of society? ... If so, we may yet have to face the problem of sterilization, which has been faced in the United States and in Germany' (Springthorpe, 1940, p.167).

Mental deficiency was conceptualised as having different grades. In the language used, 'idiocy' was at one end and 'feeble-mindedness' was the highest level of functioning (this was also referred to as 'high-grade mental deficiency'). An article from 1950 sets out the gradings used to classify 'persons with sub-normal minds', and demonstrates how offensive, disturbing and derogatory language was accepted and widely used at that time:

Idiots: Mental age 0 to 3 years

Imbeciles: Mental age 3 to 8 years

Feeble-minded (American psychiatrists call them morons). Mental age 7 to 11.

Until they reach the real age of 16 years children who appear to be feeble-minded are spoken of as 'retarded'. (The Age, 16 November 1950, p.13)

It should not be assumed that people labelled 'mentally deficient' were in fact intellectually or otherwise disabled – some 'mental defectives' were noted to be 'high grade', or of normal intelligence, but behaved in ways authorities could not accept. People could be classified as 'mentally deficient' because of criminal behaviour and even unconventional sexual behaviour, such as sex before marriage (such people were sometimes said to be 'moral defectives'). These labels about the supposed mental functioning of children were sometimes applied because of the authorities' belief that 'immorality' was a sign of being 'feeble-minded' (McFarlane, 2015, p.49).

Children could be diagnosed as mentally defective due to challenging behaviour or committing criminal offences. Inadequately-managed physical disabilities, educational disadvantage, an institutional upbringing, and poverty, neglect or abuse could all lead to this diagnosis.

Care Leaver Frank Golding has written about the many offensive terms used to describe children in their child welfare files: 'Some of us who are perfectly intelligent have found in our records that we were described as 'slow-witted, even 'low-grade mental defective' (['Our side of the story'](#), 2016).

It was not unusual for children in institutions who were emotionally disturbed to be labelled as 'high grade mental defectives' ('Forgotten Australians' report, p.269). One Care Leaver's submission to the 2004 Senate Inquiry stated: 'I found out a lot from that file – more than I really wanted to know. That's how I found out that I was classified as being "high grade mental defective" and sent to "homes" for mentally retarded boys' (p.270).

Historian Caroline Evans reflects on the disturbing language she encountered in 1920s case files from the Tasmanian Mental Deficiency Board:

Today, categories such as 'idiot', 'imbecile' and 'feeble-minded' are inappropriate, but in the 1920s eugenics gave these terms a scientific legitimacy and objectivity which had a depersonalising effect. Correspondence often referred to children certified by the State Psychological Clinic, not as a child with a 'mental defect', but as 'this defective' or 'this mental defective', terminology which objectified them as the 'other'.

In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a growing interest in Australia in mental deficiency and how state governments could approach 'the care and control of mentally defective persons' to use the language from South Australian legislation from 1913. At the time there was a widely held belief in Europe, North America and Australasia that 'feeble-mindedness' led to a range of social problems, including poverty and criminality (Evans, 2017).

The states of South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania passed legislation relating to mental deficiency. Western Australia had a Mental Deficiency Bill in 1939 that never passed, due to a lack of parliamentary support for investing money in facilities and treatments as well as opposition to the Bill's provisions relating to sterilisation (Rosser, '[Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly on the Mental Deficiency Bill \(1929\)](#)', 2013).

The head of the New South Wales State Children's Relief Department, Dr CK Mackellar, wrote an influential report after touring European, English and American institutions in 1912. 'The Treatment of Neglected and Delinquent Children in Great Britain, Europe, and America: With Recommendations as to Amendment of Administration and Law in New South Wales' report advocated the establishment of specialised institutions for 'mental defectives'. Mackellar's report contained a recommendation for 'mentally deficient' women of child-bearing age to be detained. 'He included "half-caste" women who lived on town fringes in his category of "simple or moral imbecile", along with unmarried mothers and railway camp followers' (Parry, 2012).

Some children or adults fell into the category of 'moral defective', a term that tended to be applied more to females than males. These people apparently suffered, not from a lack of intelligence, but of morality. The term was applied to single mothers, prostitutes, 'habitual criminals' and young women who were sexually active outside of marriage. People could be institutionalised for long periods for moral deficiency.

For much of the twentieth century, it was common practice to place children in institutions if they had physical or intellectual disabilities ('[You can't forget things like that](#)', 2012, p.8). While there were some institutions specifically for children with particular disabilities, it was also common for children with disabilities to be placed in orphanages or state government 'depots', where they received no appropriate support. In 1940, psychiatrist Guy Springthorpe lamented the situation in Victoria, where he claimed that 30% of residents at Royal Park Depot, the state's only reception centre at that time, were 'mentally retarded'. He said: 'It is almost a scandal the number of retarded children who enter some of the institutions of the Children's Welfare Department. There they are apt to stick.'

Children with no intellectual disability could also be placed in disability institutions, having been incorrectly diagnosed. One submission to the 2004 Senate inquiry stated:

I was brought up in the Neerkol Orphanage outside Rockhampton from the age of 10 months to 12 years old. During this time I suffered mental, physical and sexual abuse from employees of Neerkol. I was treated as being mentally retarded from the age of two until the age of 10 when they discovered that all that was wrong with me was a simple tongue tie (Submission 218, quoted in 'Forgotten Australians' report, p.42).

The “dull” characteristics displayed by some children that led to false classifications of being ‘feeble-minded’ were often the result of abuse and neglect, sometimes from the very institutions supposed to be ‘caring’ for them. Other children ended up with lifelong disabilities as a result of their (often abusive) experiences growing up in institutions.

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Resources

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- [Mental Defectives: Replies to letters](#), The Australian Women's Weekly, 16 December 1933
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- [Intellectual disability services: VF 249](#), Public Record Office Victoria Online Catalogue, No date
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