

# PACFA History Interview: Ron Perry

**Interview recorded:** 19 February 2024

**Interviewer:** Nigel Polak

**Interviewee:** Ron Perry

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## Introduction

**Nigel Polak:** Hello everyone and welcome. I'm Nigel Polak, current President of PACFA, and today I'm speaking with Ron Perry, who served as PACFA's second President from approximately 2007 to 2010.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are both meeting and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Ron, thank you very much for joining me.

**Ron Perry:** I'm pleased to. I'm actually quite excited about it because those early years were very significant and it's good that the history is being remembered and recorded.

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## Early Career and Introduction to Counselling

**Nigel Polak:** Could we begin with your life and career background and how you became involved in counselling and psychotherapy?

**Ron Perry:** I began my working life as a high school teacher and spent around 15 years in teaching.

Later I was asked to move into university work helping prepare student teachers. I realised that if I was going to work closely with university students, I needed to learn something about counselling.

At the time, counselling training was only just beginning to emerge.

I undertook counselling studies in New York during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was a fascinating period because there was enormous social change happening at that time.

My first experiences in counselling were very different from anything I had encountered before.

I remember speaking with a young teenager from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in New York who talked casually about guns and violence. It was confronting and very different from my Australian experience.

At that stage, I was involved with Catholic Church organisations and eventually became connected with what was then known as Catholic Family Welfare.

The Church wanted to establish a counselling training program and, because I had undertaken some counselling studies, I was invited to join the group developing that program.

That eventually became the Institute of Counselling.

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## The Institute of Counselling

**Ron Perry:** The Institute of Counselling was originally established as a Catholic organisation designed to train teachers, nurses and helping professionals in counselling skills.

At that time, counselling was still relatively unknown in Australia.

Psychotherapy was almost spoken about in whispers because it was strongly associated with psychoanalysis.

The psychoanalytic groups were effectively the custodians of psychotherapy.

We had to design a counselling curriculum from scratch.

We had very little money, but Catholic Family Welfare provided office space and some administrative support.

One extraordinary aspect of the Institute was the calibre of people who taught there.

Because there were very few formal counselling programs in Australia at the time, the people invited to lecture were often leaders in their fields.

They would come in and deliver specialist lectures or workshops on topics such as:

- family therapy
- developmental psychology
- counselling theory
- groupwork.

The structure became a combination of lectures and experiential groups. The experiential component was very important.

People were encouraged not simply to learn concepts intellectually but to discuss, reflect and experience the work personally.

Eventually I became Director of the Institute of Counselling.

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## The Beginnings of PACFA

**Nigel Polak:** How did your involvement with PACFA begin?

**Ron Perry:** During the 1990s, there was growing recognition that counselling and psychotherapy needed clearer standards and professional identity.

The University of New England played a very important role in this.

Hugh Craig and Ruth Stury invited people from around Australia who were leading counselling training programs to meet together and discuss the future of counselling.

That was how I became involved.

The first meetings brought together representatives from universities, private training organisations and psychoanalytic traditions.

The central questions were:

- What constitutes appropriate counselling training?
- What standards should exist?
- What does accreditation mean?
- How should counselling and psychotherapy be recognised professionally?

At that time there were already established accreditation systems for psychology and social work, but not for counselling or psychotherapy.

Initially Hugh Craig facilitated the meetings.

Later he stepped back and I was asked to become facilitator. Those meetings were incredibly inspiring.

People from very different backgrounds came together and began talking seriously about standards, ethics, training and professional recognition.

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## Naming PACFA

**Ron Perry:** One memory that stands out very clearly was the discussion about what the organisation should be called.

There were passionate discussions about whether “counselling” or “psychotherapy” should come first.

Eventually, after a great deal of discussion, the name *Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia* emerged.

It really reflected the collaborative and facilitated group process that had taken place over several years.

There were around 30 people involved and the atmosphere was energetic and creative.

Importantly, psychoanalytic groups were included in those discussions.

Many of the analysts had previously spoken almost exclusively with other analysts, while counselling educators often remained within their own professional circles.

These meetings created new connections and conversations across traditions.

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## Early Goals and Challenges

**Nigel Polak:** How did things develop from there?

**Ron Perry:** Gradually the work became more focused on accreditation requirements and standards.

We had to ask questions such as:

- How much training is necessary?
- What role should supervision play?
- What kind of experiential learning is required?
- What should constitute professional recognition?

Even today, PACFA continues working through many of those same questions.

One unfortunate development during those years was that the Australian Counselling Association decided not to join.

That was disappointing because a unified voice for counselling and psychotherapy would have been stronger.

From my perspective, ACA appeared to be operating more as a business-oriented organisation and preferred to maintain its own independent direction.

There were attempts at dialogue, but ultimately the organisations developed separately.

Another challenge was that many psychoanalytic groups eventually withdrew.

That was also a significant loss because they had contributed enormously to the early conversations.

However, many psychoanalytic practitioners felt their training traditions and standards were substantially different.

Their programs often involved years of intensive training and personal analysis.

There was concern about maintaining those standards within a broader counselling framework.

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## Establishing Standards and Recognition

**Ron Perry:** PACFA's core task became defining standards for counselling and psychotherapy.

Psychologists and social workers already had strong professional structures and political recognition.

Counselling and psychotherapy did not.

So PACFA's role was to establish:

- accreditation standards
- supervision requirements
- training benchmarks
- ethical frameworks
- professional identity.

There was also an ongoing tension between accessibility and depth of training.

Some traditions required many years of personal therapy and advanced training, while others sought more flexible pathways into counselling practice.

That tension still exists today.

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## Leadership and Governance

**Nigel Polak:** What do you remember of those early leadership years?

**Ron Perry:** Jim Crawley became PACFA's first President and I served as Vice President.

Jim made an enormous contribution in holding people together and guiding the organisation through those formative years.

When Jim stepped down, I became President.

A great deal of the work involved travel, meetings and volunteer effort.

I still remember regularly flying to Melbourne for board meetings.

There was very little funding in those days.

Most people were volunteering significant amounts of time simply because they believed counselling and psychotherapy needed a recognised professional voice.

PACFA's work gradually shifted from the initial creative and visionary stage into organisational development and governance.

Those are very different skill sets.

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## Medicare, GST and Recognition

**Nigel Polak:** One of the major continuing issues has been professional recognition in relation to Medicare and GST.

**Ron Perry:** Yes.

That became a major issue around the introduction of GST in 2000.

Some health professions were recognised as GST-exempt while counsellors and psychotherapists were not.

Psychologists and some social workers also gained Medicare recognition.

Counsellors and psychotherapists did not.

That disparity still exists.

It is symbolic of the larger issue of whether counselling and psychotherapy are recognised as legitimate health professions.

PACFA has spent decades continuing to advocate for that recognition.

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## Ongoing Challenges

**Ron Perry:** Looking back, I think there were several major challenges and lost opportunities.

One was the loss of the psychoanalytic groups. Another was the separation between PACFA and ACA.

A divided profession inevitably has less political influence. However, significant progress has still been made.

PACFA now participates in national health profession organisations and continues advocating for recognition.

That is exactly the kind of progress many of us hoped for in those early years.

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## Counselling, Psychotherapy and Mental Health

**Nigel Polak:** What is your vision for the future of counselling and psychotherapy?

**Ron Perry:** I think it is essential that psychology and social work do not come to completely own counselling and psychotherapy.

Counselling and psychotherapy have their own traditions, methods and contributions.

In countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, counselling and psychotherapy are much more clearly recognised professions.

Australia still has work to do in that regard.

Mental health work is expanding rapidly.

There is increasing awareness of trauma and psychological wellbeing, but we also need broader understandings of human suffering and distress.

Not all psychological suffering can or should be reduced to medical language.

Counselling and psychotherapy provide ways of understanding people relationally, emotionally and socially, not simply diagnostically.

That perspective is very important.

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## Looking Forward

**Ron Perry:** The future challenge is making sure counselling and psychotherapy are properly recognised as part of the broader mental health landscape.

There are opportunities across many sectors, including:

- mental health services
- disability support
- trauma recovery
- aged care
- relationship counselling
- community wellbeing.

Counsellors and psychotherapists have an enormous amount to offer.

The profession needs to continue ensuring that voice is heard politically, professionally and publicly.

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## Closing Reflections

**Nigel Polak:** One of the important themes that continues today is the need to move beyond purely medical understandings of human distress.

**Ron Perry:** Exactly.

There is a growing recognition that not everything should be understood purely through medical language.

Counselling and psychotherapy offer another way of understanding human experience.

That remains very important.

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## Closing

**Nigel Polak:** Ron, thank you very much for your time and for your contribution to PACFA and the profession over many years.

**Ron Perry:** Thank you. It's been good to reconnect with the history.

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