

PACFA History Interview: Dr Di Stow

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Interviewer: Nigel Polak

Interviewee: Dr Di Stow

Introduction

Nigel Polak: Hello and welcome.

My name is Nigel Polak and, as of today's date, 30 November 2023, I am the current President of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia.

Today I am speaking with PACFA's immediate past president, Di Stow. This interview forms part of PACFA's project documenting the history of the federation through conversations with past presidents and leaders.

Welcome, Di. It's wonderful to have you here.

Dr Di Stow: Thank you. It's really lovely to be here and to reflect on my PACFA history.

Current Work and Early Involvement with PACFA

Nigel Polak: Could you begin by telling us a little about yourself and your involvement with PACFA?

Dr Di Stow: I currently work in private practice in Hobart, specialising in grief, loss and trauma work.

I've been practising for a couple of decades now and I genuinely love the work.

PACFA added enormous value to my professional life and I first became involved in the early 2000s.

At that time, I was part of the Professional Counselling Association of Tasmania, which later evolved into PACFA Tasmania.

A group of colleagues invited me to become involved in helping build a stronger professional community for counsellors and psychotherapists in Tasmania.

That led me into organising professional development events, serving on committees and eventually becoming President of the Tasmanian association.

Early PACFA and the Professional Landscape

Dr Di Stow: In the early 2000s, PACFA was made up primarily of member associations.

These included:

- state-based counselling associations
- psychotherapy organisations
- modality-based groups
- psychoanalytic associations.

There were perhaps 30 or 40 groups nationally.

The profession itself was highly fragmented.

Each organisation maintained its own membership systems, standards and professional identity.

At my first PACFA Council meeting in Melbourne, I remember feeling both overwhelmed and excited.

People seemed incredibly knowledgeable and passionate.

There were robust debates about:

- the difference between counselling and psychotherapy
- where psychoanalysis fitted
- questions of standards and professional identity.

Those discussions were often intense, but they reflected a deep commitment to the profession.

Over time, I became deeply invested in the idea of contributing to the greater good of counselling and psychotherapy in Australia.

Building the Tasmanian Branch

Dr Di Stow: In Tasmania we built a very strong local professional community.

One of the most important developments was establishing an ongoing relationship with the Sandy Bay Yacht Club in Hobart, which became the long-term home of PACFA Tasmania professional development events.

The venue worked exceptionally well because:

- it was centrally located

- it was welcoming and easy to access
- parking was straightforward
- audiovisual support was already in place
- members could stay afterwards for meals and informal connection.

That consistency helped create a sense of professional community.

As therapists, we often work in isolation.

Creating spaces where colleagues could gather, learn and connect became incredibly important.

Professional development events in Tasmania were consistently well attended, including one-day and two-day workshops and regular monthly evening events.

Moving into National Leadership

Nigel Polak: How did your involvement with national PACFA leadership evolve?

Dr Di Stow: I initially attended PACFA Council meetings as the Tasmanian delegate.

Later, I joined the PACFA Ethics Committee, which became my first national committee role.

In 2010 or 2011, I joined the PACFA Board as Board Member Responsible for Member Associations.

The role itself was not tightly defined, so I developed it organically by building relationships with associations across the country.

That position also led me to convene the 2012 PACFA Conference in Melbourne.

The conference theme was focused on counselling and psychotherapy and what the professions had learned over time.

Standing in front of several hundred attendees to open that conference was both daunting and exhilarating.

It was a pivotal experience in my development as a leader within PACFA.

The Structure of PACFA Before the Restructure

Dr Di Stow: At that time, PACFA's governance structure was very different.

The Board included representatives connected to operational functions such as:

- ethics
- training standards
- registration
- member associations.

There was an Executive Officer rather than a CEO, supported by only a very small administrative staff.

The organisation relied heavily on volunteers.

Many people contributed enormous amounts of unpaid work because they cared deeply about the profession.

The conversations around counselling, psychotherapy and professional identity continued throughout this period.

There were also long-standing contributors such as:

- Charles Wilson
- Tim Johnson
- Alison Strasser
- Simon Feary
- Elizabeth Riley.

These individuals gave extraordinary service to PACFA and to the professions more broadly.

Progression Through Leadership Roles

Dr Di Stow: My leadership journey on the Board unfolded gradually.

I served in the following roles:

- Board Member Responsible for Member Associations
- Secretary
- Vice President
- President.

By the time I became President, I had spent many years learning how the organisation functioned and developing relationships across the country.

Throughout those years, I also remained involved with the Ethics Committee, which was incredibly valuable work.

The PACFA Restructure

Nigel Polak: One of the major developments during your leadership was the PACFA restructure.

Dr Di Stow: Yes, the restructure was absolutely enormous.

At the time, PACFA was still built around member associations.

Many small organisations each maintained their own:

- finances
- governance structures
- membership systems
- committees
- reporting requirements.

The restructure shifted PACFA toward a much more centralised national model.

This led to the creation of:

- national individual membership
- colleges
- branches
- centralised systems and finances.

The goal was to create a stronger, more unified and more sustainable professional body.

It also strengthened PACFA's ability to advocate with governments and external stakeholders.

The process involved years of consultation.

We held working parties, Council discussions, workshops and ongoing communication with members.

There was a strong commitment to transparency throughout the process.

Importantly, the restructure was designed to bring people along together rather than forcing change upon them.

Most members eventually transitioned from member associations into direct individual membership with PACFA.

Governance and Constitutional Reform

Dr Di Stow: The constitutional changes required for the restructure were substantial.

Charles Wilson played a particularly important role in this process alongside Maria Brett and a small working group.

The organisation was still operating on a very modest budget, so much of this work relied heavily on volunteer effort.

That spirit of volunteer contribution has always been one of PACFA's defining strengths.

Presidency (2016–2022)

Nigel Polak: Let's talk about your years as President.

Dr Di Stow: I became President in 2016 and served until 2022.

I felt deeply honoured to take on the role.

By that stage, Maria Brett had become PACFA's CEO.

Having a CEO position strengthened PACFA's professional standing and visibility in government and external relations.

One of the highlights of my presidency was advocacy and lobbying work on behalf of counsellors and psychotherapists.

I spent significant time meeting with:

- members of parliament
- advisers
- government representatives
- bureaucrats
- health stakeholders.

My approach was always relational and educational.

Rather than demanding recognition aggressively, I focused on explaining:

- the value of counsellors and psychotherapists

- the contribution practitioners make to the community
- the quality and professionalism of PACFA members
- the importance of recognition for the profession.

This approach was generally received very positively.

I believe PACFA gained substantial credibility during those years.

Medicare and Professional Recognition

Dr Di Stow: Medicare recognition remained a central aspiration throughout my presidency.

For many practitioners, Medicare symbolises formal professional recognition.

While full recognition has still not yet been achieved, I remain optimistic that counsellors and psychotherapists will eventually gain access.

PACFA made important progress during this period in building political relationships and increasing awareness of the profession.

Key Board Members and Contributions

Dr Di Stow: I was incredibly fortunate to work alongside many dedicated Board members.

Some key contributors included:

- Simon Feary, whose ethics work was exceptional
- Charles Wilson, who provided wise and steady leadership
- Pat Bradley, who established the College of Counselling
- George Gentless, who served as Treasurer and strengthened PACFA's finances
- Kate Briggs, who contributed significantly to training standards work
- Doug Abey, who later became Vice President.

The Board functioned as a collaborative team.

People brought enormous generosity, expertise and commitment to the organisation.

The Creation of CAPSIHP

Dr Di Stow: One particularly significant development during my presidency was the creation of CAPSIHP, the College of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Practices.

The idea emerged following a powerful conference with a strong Indigenous focus.

Ki Atkinson joined the Board as the first CAPSIHP representative.

This was an exciting and important step in recognising Indigenous healing knowledge and practices within PACFA.

CEO Transition and Strategic Direction

Nigel Polak: During your final term as President there was also a change of CEO.

Dr Di Stow: Yes.

Maria Brett had been with PACFA for around ten years and had guided the organisation through significant growth and the restructure.

The Board began thinking more strategically about PACFA's next phase.

There was a growing desire for the Board to focus more heavily on strategy while operational leadership sat more clearly with the CEO.

Johanna was recruited as the new CEO because of her:

- experience with professional associations
- strategic capability
- understanding of government and policy
- communication skills.

This reflected PACFA's increasing maturity as a national professional organisation operating within a competitive professional landscape.

The Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists

Dr Di Stow: During this period PACFA also worked collaboratively with the Australian Counselling Association on the Australian Register of Counsellors and Psychotherapists.

The purpose of the register was to provide governments and stakeholders with a single national register of practitioners.

Although there were ongoing challenges because the organisations maintained different standards and classification systems, the register still served an important purpose in representing the professions nationally.

COVID-19 and Organisational Adaptation

Dr Di Stow: COVID was another major challenge during my presidency.

The pandemic transformed how PACFA operated.

Board meetings moved online.

Training and professional development moved online.

Much therapeutic practice itself also shifted online.

At the time, the transition felt incredibly intense and uncertain.

However, PACFA adapted remarkably well.

Board members, staff and volunteers all worked hard to ensure continuity during a very difficult period.

In retrospect, the organisation demonstrated considerable resilience and flexibility.

Reflections on Leadership and Community

Di Stow: One of the strongest impressions I carry from my years with PACFA is the generosity of volunteers.

People consistently gave extraordinary amounts of time, energy and goodwill.

Even during difficult discussions, people remained committed to working things through for the greater good of the profession.

Board meetings often involved robust debate, but over time people listened, reflected and gradually found ways forward together.

That spirit of collaboration and care is something I value deeply.

I also feel incredibly proud seeing newer leaders emerge, including Nigel Polak becoming President after serving on the Board.

Closing Reflections

Nigel Polak: Dee, thank you.

PACFA has been extraordinarily fortunate to benefit from your leadership during critical years of growth, restructure and change.

You have modelled kindness, openness, strategic leadership and genuine commitment to the profession.

Dr Di Stow: Thank you so much, Nigel.

It has been wonderful reflecting on this journey.

I remain deeply proud of PACFA, its members and the counselling and psychotherapy professions.
