

Committed to the entire community

COMMENT

VIC ALHADEFF



THE *Australian Jewish News* has been requested to attend a meeting of senior rabbis of the NSW Rabbinical Council and the Sydney Beth Din to discuss this newspaper's coverage of Jewish-gay issues, and Jewish participation in the recent Mardi Gras Parade in particular, because those two bodies believe the coverage has been inconsistent with the values which a family newspaper should promote.

In light of this development, we believe we have a duty to our readers to explain our position on the matter.

The *Australian Jewish News* does not take a position regarding matters of Jewish law (*Halacha*). Nor do we sit in judgment on individuals who may have transgressed *Halacha*. That is not our task. We make no claim to be an authority on Jewish law, or indeed to present only activities which fall within the ambit of Orthodox Jewish law. Maccabi sport is played on Shabbat, for example; is the suggestion that we should cease reporting it because by doing so, we encourage desecration of Jewish law? The Reform sector of the community by definition falls outside what is considered *Halachically* Jewish. Are we also to desist from coverage of Reform activities so as to avoid encouraging violation of Orthodox Jewish law?

Our task is to reflect, and cater for, the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. That means every Jewish individual — Orthodox, Reform, republican, monarchist, heterosexual, homosexual, left-handed, right-handed. And that means covering Jewish news as it pertains to, and reflects, the entire Jewish community.

The criticism is that by giving coverage to activities such as Jewish participation in the Mardi Gras, the *Australian Jewish News* disqualifies itself from being described as a family

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ly newspaper. Our response is that it depends on the definition of "family". Does a family comprise only a father, mother, son and daughter all of whom are heterosexual? Should one of them discover that he or she is gay, does that nuclear unit automatically lose the right to call itself a family?

The argument is perhaps best made by reading the 35 letters on the subject, and the statement by 28 leaders of Australian society, in this week's edition.

The *Australian Jewish News* has been inundated by an unprecedented wave of letters from people — a number of them highly respected leaders in Australian society, a number of them heterosexual — who have been moved to respond to this issue. Furthermore, of the 35 letters, no fewer than

31 are from people who have never written to this newspaper before. Most are from people who had felt ostracised by this community because they are gay and had been made to feel inferior and unwanted. Some of the letters are a cry of pain, a plea to be heard, acknowledged and accepted.

Now, for the first time, due in part to the *Australian Jewish News* acting on its belief that every member of the community should be accorded equal respect, they are beginning to feel that they do have a home in this community.

One of the critical functions of the *Australian Jewish News* is to provide a forum — for differing and competing ideas and ideologies. It will argue a position on an issue while publishing articles which promote a diametrically opposing position. We encourage and embrace robust debate. This, we believe, is the mark of a mature newspaper and of a mature community.

Professor Ron Penny, Australia's foremost immunologist, has congratulated the *Australian Jewish News* for opening social issues such as homophobia, substance abuse and domestic violence to community scrutiny and debate. "Thank-you for this vital socially responsible attitude," he writes. "We have swept social issues that we do not want under the carpet. A majority of us working in this area, I am sure, join me in applauding you, as well as those in our community who as Jews are isolated because of ignorance, denial or prejudice, yet live in a community subjected for centuries to the same treatment from others. Keep up your commitment to the minorities of a minority community."