

# OCA plans changes in NT

The Office of Courts Administration was set up in January of this year.

Jim Howard, the Chief Executive Officer seconded from the Federal Court to set up the Office, said the role of the OCA was to provide fiscal and managerial support for courts in the NT.

He said the establishment of the Office of Courts Administration was consistent with national trends in both federal and state jurisdictions with the rationale being administrative autonomy for the court system.

Mr Howard said the OCA was not just a mechanism for administration of the day to day running of the courts.

"The goals for the OCA are: one, enhancement of the delivery of court services to the community; two, the improvement of productivity of individual segments of the OCA and the communication level between them; and, three, the efficient management of resources allocated to the OCA," Mr Howard said.

He said the courts have been examining better and less expensive ways of performing their statutory functions. He cited the privatisation of bailiff operations last year as an example of improved efficiency and said the courts were looking at alternative methods of providing transcripts.

"The OCA would welcome any suggestions for change from solicitors through the Law Society," he said. He said establishing the OCA did not incur any additional cost other than

that of a salary for the Chief Executive Officer.

Mr Howard said existing Supreme and Magistrate court staff were transferred from the Department of Law, as were existing departmental administrative staff who were attached to the court system.

"The courts become responsible for their own budgets; they are no longer dependent on the Department of Law for administrative support," he said.

"The change strengthens the independence of the judiciary and the magistracy from the other two arms of

in videoconferencing will have an impact in the Territory over the next year or so," he said.

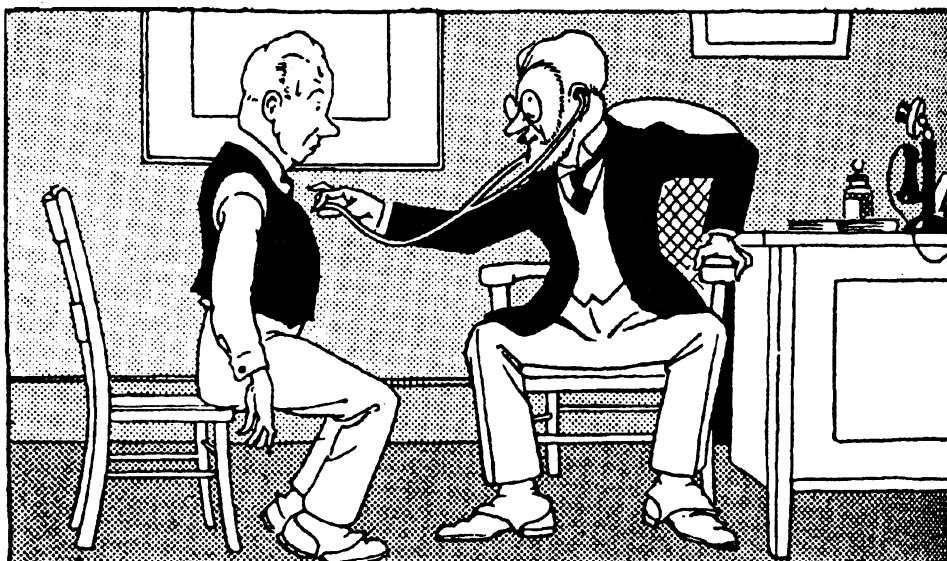
"In addition to the Telecom network available at the NTU, Tanami Network Pty Ltd now links Darwin with Alice Springs and other areas in the Tanami grouping.

"The Tanami Network can patch in to Telecom's ISDN lines providing access to other parts of Australia and overseas.

"It should be possible, for example, for solicitors in the Northern Territory to have conferences with counsel in other parts of the country by

videoconferencing.

"It should also be possible to arrange for people called as expert witnesses - say, Sydney or Melbourne orthopaedic specialists required to give evidence for an hour or so in a Supreme Court action - to give that evidence from their home cities rather than



*Videoconferenced evidence from southern experts?*

government.

"At the same time it makes the courts more responsible for the use of resources allocated to them," Mr Howard said.

He said employing a consultant to improve efficiency would have been a "band-aid approach for temporary respite" whereas the administrative structural change brought about by the OCA will improve court administration.

Mr Howard said future changes would involve increasing the availability of mediation in the Territory, especially if it doesn't involve additional expense for clients.

"I expect that technological advances

travelling to the Territory.

"The cost savings to clients can be considerable," Mr Howard said.

He said a lot could be done to reduce the time from commencement to completion of proceedings, whether criminal or civil.

"I have yet to see a case where a witness' memory improved as the time between events giving rise to an action and giving evidence about it increased.

"I share some of the views expressed to the Senate Cost of Justice Inquiry that the courts, the bar and the solicitors branch can work harder and better together to achieve a just result of disputes at less cost" he said.