



Information Technology (IT) and the law

In this edition of *Balance*, guest co-editor, Jason Schoolmeester, has collected a range of contributions from those in the know about Information Technology.

Courts and technology

Justice Trevor Riley

The Supreme Court website, which has served us well for some time, is undergoing a revamp. The appearance of this site has become tired, and we are pushing for a total makeover. In the meantime, some changes are being effected. The most significant of those has been the introduction of a new and advanced search facility for Northern Territory judgments, replacing the former inadequate search engine. The new facility provides more search fields and permits the use of more than one search field at a time.

The content of the site is also being reviewed and revised. There will be an increased emphasis on using the site as an educational tool for the benefit of the public and, in particular, for potential jurors. A good deal of material has already been added to the site and more is to come. It is anticipated that the website will be enhanced by photographs showing the various courts in session together with photographs of those who provide the public face of the court, such as Registry staff, Sheriff's officers, court reporting staff and security personnel.

At the same time a new jury information book is being developed, providing a wider range of information for potential jurors. The desire is to increase public awareness of what happens in court proceedings, and to endeavour to



Justice Riley at the Supreme Court

make the jury process as comfortable as possible for those who may be involved for the first time.

The website for the Northern Territory Magistrates Court has a much fresher appearance, notwithstanding it has now been in operation for some time. It is a site which is easily navigated and which provides a great deal of useful information for both the profession and for members of the public who may be involved in court proceedings. Some of the information on that site needs to be brought up to date, and efforts are being made in this regard. Overall, the website seems to be an effective method of communicating with the profession and with the general public.

In Alice Springs a new video conferencing system has recently

been installed to replace that which had been causing problems for some time. The system is connected to a new vulnerable witness room. All reports suggest the new system is working well. A similar system has been installed in Court One of the Magistrates Courts in Darwin. Full use of the system installed in Darwin is awaiting final training of staff. It is expected that the system will be in full operation within the next month or so.

In recent times there has been an increase in the number of cases involving child complainants and child witnesses. This is particularly so in the area of sexual offences. The legislature has passed amendments to the *Evidence Act* designed to provide a greater level of protection for child witnesses, including permitting the pre-recording of such evidence. The Supreme Court has responded to these developments by developing relevant protocols. In view of the increasing demands in Darwin the court has created a further vulnerable witness room to allow the giving of evidence from a remote location. The room is situated on level two and nearby is a "soft" room with furnishings and facilities designed to assist such witnesses to feel at ease with their surroundings.