

# Holding on to hope in desperate times

## Nā tō rourou, nā taku rourou ka ora ai te iwi

This issue has come together in a year that has been incredibly stressful and demanding for the social work profession, and for the entire social services sector. I struggle to find the words to describe the horrific cuts to services, the dashed hopes of people in our cities and towns who were looking forward to better hospitals, the widespread redundancies and job losses in both the public and non-government sectors. The rise of unemployment. The attacks on support and empowerment services for disabled people. The failure to implement a progressive housing policy. The list goes on as we reel from almost daily attacks on progressive policies and initiatives. So much of this sustained barrage of cuts is based on a coalition agreement that voters in Aotearoa New Zealand didn't vote for. Negotiated in secret with concession after concession pandering to shallow, facile, populist demands. Seemingly only representing the landlord class and mining and tobacco companies and committed to a particularly nasty form of extractive capitalism, the coalition leaders' behaviour is arrogant and utterly lacking in empathy. This makes the 'There is no alternative' of the neoliberal savagery of the 1990s seem mild. And the dog whistling to racism....

The attack on Section 7 aa of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 is an awful illustration of the coalition government's intention to roll back this progressive legislation that aimed to reduce the number of Māori children in state care. Kendra Cox has explained that the government's proposed removal of this key section of our child protection legislation threatens what was a significant, practical and welcomed response to the disproportionate removal of Māori tamariki from their families (Cox, 2024). The health sector is reeling from the cuts to essential

screening and the cynical disestablishment of Te Aka Whai Ora, the Māori Health Authority, which was designed to target funding, to reduce health inequities, to develop the Māori health workforce and improve accountability across the health system, which was not even given a chance to stand in the sunlight and imagine a better Aotearoa without the inequalities that should shame us all (Gurney & Koea, 2023; Gurney et al., 2020).

At the beginning of this year, in our first issue for 2024, we called for social work resistance to the rollback of socially progressive policies which "reflect conservative notions of equity and freedom from within a neo-libertarian paradigm, promoting an extreme version of individualism, downplaying the need for social solidarity" (Beddoe et al., 2024, p. 2). As the year rolls on, we can only ask again that social workers contribute to the many efforts to challenge these cruel attacks on social solidarity through grassroots mobilisation, trade union action, resistance and protest. It is indeed a time for radical hope.

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This issue contains five full articles, a Commentary article, a Practice Note, and three Book Reviews. The contributions canvass many topics of importance in our communities. As always, we are grateful for the many efforts of authors, reviewers, and those who contribute to the editorial and production processes.

In this issue, Polly Yeung Kora Deverick, Linsey Ellis, Hannah Mooney (Ngāti Raukawa ki te tonga, Te Āti Awa, Ngā Rauru, Te Āti Haunui a Pāpārangī, Pākehā), and Kieran O'Donoghue continue the important dialogue about the role of social

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work in addressing issues related to climate change and environmental sustainability. In “Social workers’ perceptions and attitudes of environmental issues and sustainable development as social work practice in Aotearoa New Zealand”, they acknowledge the burgeoning research and projects undertaken internationally that link climate issues and sustainability to principles of justice and equality, hence the centrality of environmental justice to the project of social work. However, there is limited research conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand and the authors set out to explore the attitudes and knowledge of social workers in this country. There is no shortage of rationale for this research—people around the world are becoming more aware of the physical urgency given the reality of weather events and the impact particularly on vulnerable and oppressed populations, including those in Aotearoa New Zealand and its sister Pacific nations.

Using an online survey, the researchers explored the views of social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand about environmental justice and sustainability practice. Respondents agreed social work practice should reflect these values; however, they are not active in exploring this further or supporting climate change initiatives. The researchers suggest this may be due to the current micro, individualistic focus of social work that does not require the integration of macro issues. There is a general uncertainty about what environmental social work practice is and a lack of connection to international initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. From a positive perspective, the study acknowledged the success of Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, campaigning successfully against practices known to damage valuable ecosystems and contribute to climate disasters. There is a clear link between environmental justice and colonisation, and the commodification and exploitation of resources. Recommendations from the research primarily include a

focus on social work education, requiring it to embrace theoretical perspectives that prioritise environmental justice and introduce skills related to sustainability practice.

Rural poverty is the focus of Lesley Pitt’s article “Experiences of rural poverty in Stratford district, Aotearoa New Zealand: A qualitative study with implications for rural social work”. Pitt interviewed 28 participants who had self-identified as experiencing poverty ranging in age from teenagers to over-65s. Pitt found that living with poverty while living in a rural setting diminished participants’ wellbeing and limited their opportunities. Participants experienced poverty stigma, both geographic and social isolation, and difficulties with transport and accessing services which further exacerbated isolation. Pitt emphasises the importance of social workers in efforts to reduce poverty stigma and recommends the implementation of community development approaches to advocate for improved and equitable transport options and service provision. Making links between the poverty experienced at an individual or whānau level and the sociopolitical structures in Aotearoa New Zealand society is crucial to the empowerment of disadvantaged rural people and is supported by the aims of the *ANZASW Code of Ethics* (2019).

Ruth Choi Lee and Jay Marlowe’s article, “Journeys into palliative care: Social workers’ narratives of mobilising and sustaining practice” speaks to the role of social workers working in palliative care. It identifies this as an important, and growing, field of social work practice that provides support for patients and their families facing life-threatening illness. As the authors note, palliative care social workers provide support through illness and after death with practice occurring in a variety of settings. The article reports on findings from a qualitative exploratory study that utilised interviews and a focus group with palliative care social workers

in Aotearoa New Zealand. The goals of the study included to explore and advance understanding of social work practice frameworks and assessments in palliative care alongside considering implications for practice. The findings of the study highlight how social workers' personal histories, education and work experience shape their practice. The voices of participants in the article speak to their experience and shed light on palliative care social work, but also the education and support that is required to undertake social work in this field. Choi Lee and Marlowe conclude that use of self, embodying personal awareness, empathy and professional values, is the most important tool for engaging with patients and their whānau. After discussing these findings, Choi Lee and Marlowe suggest some recommendations that would further support social workers in this field.

In "Older Chinese migrants' social connectedness in Aotearoa New Zealand during Covid-19", Matt Rankine, Hua Li, Tian Tian and Liz Beddoe report on a qualitative study with social workers and older Chinese who had received a service from a community agency. The authors were interested in exploring the impact of digital technology in alleviating loneliness among older Chinese migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. Community social workers interviewed for the study recognised the potential of digital technology to enhance social connections for older migrants, although they were concerned by the barriers to technology access posed by skills, confidence, and language. In general terms, social workers valued face-to-face interactions. The older migrants did not report loneliness but did report good social connections. Most older participants embraced digital technology, acknowledging that they had time to learn new skills. Both groups expressed some concerns about the possible risks of using digital platforms. The authors also noted the greater need for better funded social and community work efforts to support digital

literacy and English literacy enhancement to reduce barriers and minimise loneliness for older migrants.

Barbara Staniforth's article in this issue is another in the series of life histories, "Their stories, our histories", which was commenced by Dr Mary Nash (Nash, 2004). The series of articles reflects on the life events and valuable contributions of key social work figures within social work in Aotearoa New Zealand (Staniforth, 2007; Staniforth & Nash, 2016). The focus of this article is on capturing the many contributions to social work of Adjunct Professor Ken Daniels. The article highlights how Ken's life and professional journey intertwined to offer important contributions to the development of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Alongside this, his strong health and mental health focus and an eagerness to remain engaged with practice outside of academia saw him involved with the development of health social work competencies as well as becoming an important voice in the developing contexts of assisted human reproduction. The article also touches on Ken's role with Richmond Fellowship. As with all the articles in this series, Staniforth has sensitively captured the essence of the person and offers an opportunity for reflection on the legacy of Ken. This reminds us of the path the social work profession has navigated in Aotearoa New Zealand and which we should hold close as we embrace the future.

In a Viewpoint entitled "The sustainability of social work education during low enrolment in Aotearoa New Zealand", Hakyun Kim aims to initiate a discussion about the sustainability of the current 4-year bachelor's degree in social work. Kim notes that, unlike students in other health sector professions who typically complete 3-year bachelor's degrees, social work students must invest in an additional year, incurring both emotional and financial costs, to achieve their goals to be registered social workers. This is a complex issue and is very topical

as bachelor-level social work degrees in several universities are discontinued. Kim explores the impact of declining student numbers and worrying retention rates in social work with a growing concern over the future sustainability of the workforce (Social Workers Registration Board, 2021). The persistence of student financial hardship and related stress is noted in recent research in Aotearoa New Zealand (for example Bartley et al., 2024; Beddoe et al., 2023; Howells, 2024) and in Australia (Morley et al., 2023; Oke et al., 2023). Although Kim concludes that, while no easy solution is available, key stakeholders, including the Social Workers Registration Board, the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, social work education providers, and other relevant entities, must work together to develop strategies that sustain social work qualifications without compromising educational quality. The editors of the journal will be interested to see responses to this Viewpoint.

The topic of radicalisation and the role of social workers in responding to it in working with young people arose in the last decade particularly in the UK (McKendrick & Finch, 2017; Stanley, 2018). In a new Practice Note, Tony Stanley and Steven Barracosa present “Responding to radicalisation and extremism risks for youth: An emerging practice issue for child protection and youth justice in Aotearoa”. Stanley and Barracosa note that, while there is a growing literature, there is a gap in relation to providing guidance for practitioners. They also note that much of the extant literature focuses on young people engaged in extreme Islamist ideas, ideologies, and groups such as Islamic State (Stanley et al., 2018) while ignoring threats posed by the rapid re-emergence of right-wing extremism which is the primary area of concern in Aotearoa New Zealand. Stanley and Barracosa offer a case study to encourage social workers to think through how they might respond should they encounter extremist views.

Finally, in this issue we have three Book Reviews. Lesley Pitt reviews *Who Cares? Life on Welfare in Australia* by Eve Vincent. Pitt notes that this book will be of interest to those interested in conditional welfare and poverty, and understanding the daily lived experience of beneficiaries, topics of immediate concern in Aotearoa New Zealand at this time. Barbara Staniforth reviews *For Social Betterment. Social Work Education in Australia* by Jane Miller. Staniforth asserts that Miller has produced an excellent resource, exploring the development of social work, and particularly social work education, in Australia from 1900 to 1960. Darren Renau reviews *Critical Social Work with Children and Families: Theory, Context and Practice*, the second edition of Steve Rogowski’s well received book which applies a critical social work lens to work with families. Renau notes the helpful provisions of many examples of resistance to policies that slow progress towards social justice.

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