

Recognising the social determinants of mental distress

This issue contains a special section on mental health, co-edited by Simon Lowe and Joanna Appleby. Our thanks to Jo and Simon and all the contributors and reviewers.

In their commentary on the “Social work practice implications of upcoming mental health reforms” in this issue, Genevieve Smith and Joanna Appleby offer an informative account of the key challenges for mental health services and for people experiencing mental distress in Aotearoa New Zealand. They contextualise their discussion with reference to the impact of four decades of neoliberal reforms on our people and on our health and social services—reforms that have fostered deep economic inequality, racism, precarity and despair in the lives of the many (see, also, the review of Ferguson, 2017 in this issue). These reforms have also devastated mental health services through underfunding, service rationing and managerial business models that alienate service users, pressurise front-line workers and fracture service provision. Smith and Appleby explore four challenges faced by those who would reform mental health services: the steady growth in demand for services along with the severity of presenting problems, the failure to maintain or increase the supply of services leading to issues with service accessibility, the *postcode lottery* of service variability between the 20 District Health Boards, and staff retention and burnout (partly a product of the first two challenges).

The material results of this long-standing neglect have been highlighted in a series of recent news reports: on the decrepit, damp, mouldy and rat-infested infrastructure of mental health units (Donovan, 2021; Lewis, 2021); on acute crises in mental health teams where staff feel scared, distressed and unsafe at work (Cook, 2020; Meier, 2021); and on

long and growing wait times for access to mental health services (Cardwell, 2021; Quinn, 2021). These news reports highlight, not only the crises in the public system, but that the private sector is also becoming overwhelmed. Quinn (2021) cites comments by the Executive Advisor of the College of Clinical Psychologists that, “[t]he private system always used to be the overflow from the public system, but now we’re getting to the point where the overflow is overflowing.”

These appalling service failures are also reflected in our stubborn youth suicide statistics, where Aotearoa New Zealand leads the world (OECD, 2017); and in the overwhelming prevalence of mental health or substance use disorders in the Aotearoa New Zealand prison system (91% of all prisoners). The Chief Executive of the Department of Corrections has declared, “[t]he high prevalence of mental illness among prisoners means that the Department of Corrections is managing more people with mental illness than any other institution in New Zealand” (The Department of Corrections, 2017).

In a study comparing mental health services in 14 developed countries, Aotearoa New Zealand was found to have the second-lowest number of general psychiatry beds per 100,000 of the population and, consequently (at 70%) the highest rate of involuntary admissions and emergency readmissions (NHS Benchmarking Network, 2019). Of course, a low ratio of psychiatric beds might indicate a positive policy preference to invest in accessible, community-based services, but the evidence above—and the emergency readmission rates—suggests otherwise. It is small wonder that Andrew Little, the health minister responsible, expressed alarm that

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the government's 2019 decision to invest \$1.9 billion extra in mental health services, as part of the reforms discussed by Smith and Appleby, has, to date, resulted in only five extra acute mental health beds, and that many patients are sleeping on mattresses on the floor of mental health units (Lynch, 2021).

In their commentary, Smith and Appleby argue that the "upcoming reforms provide an opportunity to address some of the long-standing issues" in our mental health services; and that "there needs to be adequate funding so that mental health services can move from a business model to a recovery model." We agree. Indeed, arguably, one of the central barriers to achieving the reforms necessary to all public services (including Oranga Tamariki) is a bankrupt business culture with its alienating language and inappropriate processes. Despite its obsession with "stakeholder engagement", "long-term pathways" and "transformational change" (Ministry of Health, 2021) the Ministry of Health stands accused of failing to deliver. The toxic managerial culture and lexicon of customers and business processes need to be swept aside in favour of a public service orientation that values a cooperative approach, supports staff and welcomes the active involvement of service users in service delivery, design and improvement. More than this, we need to build a social order driven, not by the demands of profit or cold managerial efficiency, but one based on meeting human need—a social order that recognises the social determinants of mental distress, one that the Marxist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1955) described long ago in his book, *The Sane Society*. The articles in the special section on mental health in this issue all emphasise the importance of listening to the voices of those with lived experience and strengthening collaborative ways of practising.

Behiye Ali, Barbara Staniforth, and Carole Adamson report on a qualitative study conducted with individuals with lived

experience of suicidal ideation and/or attempt. In "Reflecting on lived experience: Suicide prevention and the importance of social work in mental health", a variety of effective interventions are identified including: exercise, addressing physical health needs, practising mindfulness, use of medications and spirituality. The authors note that social workers can make an important contribution towards wellbeing through the provision of psychosocial interventions within a holistic health approach. They also emphasise the importance of involving individuals with lived experience both within research (to inform policy and practice), and by a collaborative approach to treatment decisions.

In "Forgotten but not gone: A heuristic literature review of sibling suicide bereavement", Leah Royden notes that, while Aotearoa New Zealand's suicide rates are amongst the highest in the developed world, there is a lack of research literature which focuses on the sibling experience of suicide loss. Royden notes that suicide-bereaved siblings experience significantly higher rates of mental illness compared to control groups. Royden's literature review clarifies what international research on the sibling experience of suicide bereavement tells us and in a rich contribution, draws on her lived experience to examine key themes of guilt, "unacceptable" anger, social stigmatisation, self-judgement, isolation, and the shattering of relational trust. She calls for further attention to the needs of bereaved siblings in both practice and research.

In "Cessation strategies used successfully by individuals in recovery from methamphetamine addiction", Yvonne Gordon and Christine Stephens report on an exploratory study which aimed to gain insight from individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand who have experienced methamphetamine dependence and now identify as being in recovery, to discover which strategies, approaches or treatment appeared helpful in their recovery. In-depth interviews provided rich data

which were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Four themes emerged to describe the lived experience of recovery from methamphetamine misuse: getting away, support, personal sources of strength, and treatment. These elements provide an insight into their journey of abstinence and recovery.

On the same themes of recovery from alcohol and other drug addiction, Rachel Jowett, Michael Dale, and Lareen Cooper's article, "Mitigating barriers to addiction recovery in New Zealand: A lived experience perspective", report findings from a qualitative study. Jowett and colleagues utilised a constructivist approach, conducting semi-structured interviews and undertaking thematic analysis. This article identifies themes highlighting what contributed to, and created barriers to, the interview participants' successful AOD addiction recovery. Barriers were societal, widespread and pervasive stigma, for example, and were systemic, where services did not meet needs and funding and other supports were inadequate. Enabling factors included the ability of health professionals to build effective therapeutic relationships, participants' own internal processes, good boundaries, ethical care and supportive friends and families.

Our Classic Book Review section is a space where authors are encouraged to reflect on the nature and significance of texts that have had a profound influence on the social work profession. In this review, commissioned for the special section, Iain Ferguson, author of *Politics of the Mind: Marxism and Mental Distress*, discusses R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study of Sanity and Madness* and extends his review to include several other texts by this highly influential Scottish psychiatrist (1927–1989). In effect, Ferguson provides us with a comprehensive overview of Laing's profound contribution to a humane understanding of mental distress and offers insight into the life of the author, warts and all.

In "They feel like it's all based around the offender: Professionals explore how victim participation in family group conferences can be enhanced", Tracy Williams and Julia Ioane explore the effects of a 2019 pilot project that aimed to increase the participation of victims in Youth Justice family group conferences (FGCs). Earlier experiences of participation had led victims to feel that it's "all based around the offender", despite the reconciliation aims of FGCs. This Auckland-based trial changed the process of information sharing and preparation roles for FGCs, ensuring that Victim Supportⁱⁱⁱ were notified by Police at the time Oranga Tamariki was also notified, and victims were contacted initially by Victim Support and offered information and support. This mixed methods evaluation found that the pilot did increase the participation of victims and also identified enablers of implementation. These enablers included training and resources, better streamlining of the information flow between Police, Oranga Tamariki and Victim Support, gaining feedback from victims before the FGC and ensuring timely information sharing. The importance of preparing victims for the FGC and offering emotional support in a culturally responsive manner helped ensure that victims could participate in meaningful ways. Seldom studied, this project provides important insights into victim experiences in youth justice FGCs and how to improve their woeful levels of participation.

The role of the insider researcher and the extent to which they are members of the group being studied is an intriguing feature of qualitative research, and Richard Brown bravely and creatively explores this dynamic in the article "Messages to first responders from a bereaved parent." Using autoethnography, Brown records and analyses the tragic circumstances of losing his child, doing so from a dual insider perspective—exploring his experience as both a bereaved parent, and a registered health social worker. This piece of work can only be described as taonga, a gift generously

offered from the depths of painful personal experience to create awareness and offer deep insight to professionals who are first to respond to such events. Brown concludes that parents require care for both their immediate and long-term needs, as what happens in those first moments will impact on the well-being of parents over the years that follow.

Social work supervision in statutory child protection settings is the subject of Matt Rankine and Andrew Thompson's article, "'Moving out of the safe zone': Promoting learning communities and reflective supervision in a social work statutory child protection agency." Rankine and Thompson utilised critical reflection as a methodological lens, working with four experienced Oranga Tamariki supervisors in a learning community where supervision recordings were brought to each meeting to improve reflective capacity, critical reflection and skills. Data were collected from the learning community and thematic analysis was undertaken to explore current supervision practice in the organisation. The three themes generated from the learning community discussions were: *identification of supervisory skills and interventions; the structure of supervision; and working with emotion and trauma*. These themes highlighted the significance of the learning community as a forum for supervisors to engage in positive and constructive feedback with their colleagues in a supportive space.

Frank Ainsworth's contribution, "The best interests of the child: More questions about this construct", critiques the hegemony of this doctrine in Anglophone child protection systems, uncovering the issues which this overly simplistic imperative has obscured over time. Attention is given to the legalistic origins of this doctrine and the benefits to be gained from developing a wider and more inclusive community focused approach to working in the field of child maltreatment.

In a Viewpoint article, "At home: Field Education during lockdown" Yesse Cox, David McKenzie, Bronwyn Powell-Grub and

Liz McCafferty provide practice reflections on the experiences of participants in student placements during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Aotearoa New Zealand. McCafferty and colleagues offer insights into what helped and what could have been done differently. Regular debriefing, supervision and a post-crisis debrief are all important elements that aid the learning and support the wellbeing of the student.

Our book reviews for the special section include two on mental health topics. Barbara Staniforth reviews *Trauma, Women's Mental Health, and Social Justice: Pitfalls and Possibilities* by Emma Tseris. Neil Ballantyne reviews *Politics of the Mind: Marxism and Mental Distress* by Iain Ferguson.

Lastly, Diane Smithson reviews *Effective Leadership, Management & Supervision in Health and Social Care* edited by Richard Field and Keith Brown.

Neil Ballantyne and Liz Beddoe

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Notes

- i Oranga Tamariki is the statutory service for children and families in Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/>
- ii Victim Support provides a free, nationwide support service for people affected by crime, trauma, and suicide in Aotearoa New Zealand. <https://victimsupport.org.nz/>

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