

HOW I BECAME 'CULTURALLY UNSAFE'

A nurse tutor recounts how it has felt to be labelled 'culturally unsafe' by his colleagues after making attempts to uphold standards of nursing education.

By **Brian Stabb**

BELIEVE I have an understanding of the concepts inherent in the Treaty of Waitangi. I know that the injustices perpetrated by the Crown upon Maori-dom must be redressed if we are to become an integrated and content nation.

As a mental health nurse who has worked in New Zealand for some 22 years, I have developed a deep awareness of the effects these injustices have had upon the physical and mental health of Maori.

This awareness has not been inspired by attending treaty seminars or cultural sensitivity workshops — no such education was available when I came to this country in the early '70s. This learning for me was experiential, not academic.

I learnt to be culturally sensitive in the security block of Lake Alice Hospital, where the Maori occupancy rate often exceeded 80%. I learnt of the importance of Maori custom and protocol in the homes of, and with the whanau of, the mentally ill in Rotorua, where my client caseload was predominantly Maori.

In the many crises situations in which I found myself, I learnt also that there are facets of human behaviour and communication which transcend cultural difference. They are the qualities of respect, humility, openness, honesty and unconditional regard. These concepts are the fundamental building blocks of most nursing theory and

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they enshrine the uniqueness which makes nursing a truly altruistic profession.

I am concerned that there is now a tendency within the hierarchy of nursing to undervalue clinical expertise in favour of academic achievement, to focus more on what is "politically correct" at the expense of client-centred concerns, and to seek the further feminisation of the profession while ignoring serious male health issues. I do not make such observations lightly. My thoughts and feelings on these issues are based on my own experiences. So to those who scream dissent, I say: "Don't discount me, don't condemn me, but talk to me."

In recent years, as a tutor in the nursing and health studies department at Waikato Polytechnic, I have fought to maintain basic standards of nurse education. During that conflict I have been labelled "culturally unsafe" by the department's cultural safety committee. Those who have labelled me have done so behind closed doors. They have refused to meet me individually for almost two years, despite me constantly seeking dialogue.

Rather it seems they have tried collectively to seek my dismissal. I have never been directly informed why I am "culturally unsafe," nor have I been informed what it is I need to do to remedy this apparent deficiency. This label has had a detrimental and profound effect on my professional life and still continues.

I support many of the fundamental tenets of cultural safety and wish to learn more about others. Three years ago I sought to learn more about cultural safety testing — in the light of my personal experiences I do not now support that concept. Having been on the receiving end of that label, I have experienced it as a racial judgement which carries all the stigmas of the most rabid forms of racism.

Further, it seems this label can be handed out willy nilly with little or no account-

ability. The rationale I have been offered is that, as tangata whenua, Maori have the unassailable right to make such judgements and are accountable only to other tangata whenua.

The 1990 *Kawa Whakaruruhau* document, on which Waikato Polytechnic based the cultural safety component of its diploma course, says cultural safety cannot be rigidly defined. It says decisions about culturally safe practice should be made by a polytechnic Komiti Kawa Whakaruruhau (cultural safety committee), consisting of a non-Maori member judged culturally safe by Maori people, one local tangata whenua member, two Maori nurses and one Maori polytechnic staff member.

The document says the "at risk" group is most competent to recognise, define and act upon culturally safe issues and that decisions made by the cultural safety committee should be accepted by polytechnic staff and administrators.

I find this sinister and have experienced

What happened and when

This is a summarised chronology of events in Brian Stabb's dispute with Waikato Polytechnic.

- Mar-Oct 1992: Brian Stabb tells Waikato Polytechnic and the Nursing Council that he believes standards of student supervision are not being met at Tokanui Hospital. Incidents included:
 - Stabb sends students home as they have no supervision.
 - An unqualified tutor tells a student who witnesses an assault on a patient by a nurse not to worry about it. Action is later taken against the nurse. District Inspector of Mental Health Services makes formal inquiries into incident.
 - A tutor is appointed with inappropriate qualifications and no registered nurse experience.
- Adverse response from colleagues and HOD.
- July 1992: Sexual harassment charge made against him; later withdrawn.
- Sept 1992: Mediation attempt by ASTE fails.
- July 1993: Request for protection from harassment and new office outside department refused.
- August 1993: Nursing department's Komiti Kawa Whakaruruhau alleges his course is "culturally unsafe."
- Sept 1993: Lodges formal complaint against nursing HOD.
- Dec 1993: Nursing Council tells polytechnic that its standards are "currently being met."
- April 1994: Talks to media about his campaign over teaching standards.
- August 1994: Takes personal grievance case against the polytechnic for not providing him with a safe working environment. No agreement.
- November 1994: Case heard again — settlement reached (confidential).
- December 1994: Nine tutors initiate personal grievance cases against Waikato Polytechnic, demanding Stabb be dismissed.
- January 1995: Nine tutors withdraw personal grievance cases but refuse individual mediation with Brian Stabb.
- February 1995: Factional conflict within department continues.