

letters

Waikato nursing tutor speaks out

IN THE wake of my recent revelations about Waikato Polytechnic attempting to buy the silence of both myself and former nursing tutor Raj Sanggaran. I expect considerable criticism from those factions in the nursing world that I have spoken out against.

No doubt the fact that I am male and English (despite having spent half my life in New Zealand) will lead to the assumption that I am obviously "entrenched in my own personal racism" and in need of a good dose of cultural sensitivity training. I have grown accustomed to such assumptions being made about me over the last three years. Invariably such opinions are expressed covertly among the cloistered huddles of the "politically correct." Such are my experiences in the nursing and health studies department of Waikato Polytechnic where open and honest communication is a concept strictly for the classroom — preached but not practised.

I find it hard to believe that the negative behaviours I have experienced have apparently been spawned from the fine ideals and aspirations of the bicultural lobby. How could this have happened? What has gone wrong?

Two decades of psychiatric nursing have left me with the habit of being an inveterate recorder. I have kept all the records of my experiences, the poisonous letters, the censored minutes, the evidence of the interception of confidential mail to the Nursing Council. This material belongs to me, not to Waikato Polytechnic.

So why didn't I take the \$50,000 offered to me by the polytechnic to keep quiet about my concerns about mental health training, and run? Why not turn my back on the nursing world and retreat with my family and my music? Why not take time to heal the pain and disillusionment I feel? (In my more stressful moments I used to fantasise about returning my nursing registration to the Nursing Council as a form of protest, like a Beutle returning his OBE!)

Why not? Too many years, that's why, just too many years. I began my career in the mid-sixties at a large psychiatric hospital in the north of England. As a young man I saw some of the worse kinds of institutional violence that a human being can be subjected to, and to my shame was collusive in



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my silence. Those memories never leave me. I have seen many changes in the last 20 years — gradual and hard fought for changes brought about by psychiatric nurses. Nurses who don't just pontificate about healthy models of communication, but who live them with their clients, and practise them in their everyday lives. Nurses who understand that it is OK to have diversity of opinion because out of such diversity arises creative thought, personal growth and true mental health. Nurses who despite fiscal constraint, career uncertainty and abysmal working conditions, continue to provide quality care to the mentally ill. I feel proud to identify with them and the richness they bring to the rest of the nursing profession.

Mental health care in New Zealand is in transition, moving from an institution-based model to a community-based model. I have grave concerns that, in the process of this transition, we are creating a scenario for abuse with untrained carers, poor facilities and inadequate funding. It is absolutely vital at this time that we maintain standards of education in mental health care if we are to ensure quality mental health care in the future. The only insurance we have in this area is the Nursing Council standards for nurse education.

I first brought my concerns to my head of

department in March 1992 with cited cases of unqualified and inexperienced tutors supervising large numbers of students in the acute areas of Tokanui Hospital. Despite my remonstrations, this practice continued on the specific instruction of my head of department. I pursued my concerns through the complaints procedures of the polytechnic yet my professional concerns remained unacknowledged and unaddressed. During this time I suffered a variety of obstructive behaviours which included censorship of my concerns from the minutes of a general staff meeting and false allegations of harassment.

At this time, I informed my colleagues of my intention to complain to the Nursing Council in a departmental memo. I received a barrage of abusive mail from the "politically correct" brigade.

Despite being given an assurance of confidentiality by secretarial staff, my complaint to Nursing Council was intercepted by my head of department and distributed to administrative staff at Tokanui Hospital. A week later the principal nurse of Tokanui presented me with a copy of my own letter.

My first communication with the Nursing Council regarding my concerns was in October 1992, and I lodged a formal complaint in February 1993. I did so with an absolute trust and belief in the integrity of the Nursing Council. The ensuing investigation took almost a year and the results were released to me in December 1993. The council said it was satisfied that standards were currently being met at Waikato Polytechnic's nursing department and that the council would continue to monitor the department to ensure standards were maintained. The council said it now regarded the matter as closed.

I am now left with some questions that I must ask of Nursing Council:

1) Considering that this was a matter of ongoing compromising of standards which



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