

## 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 \$30,000 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 Beatle 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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## letters

involved client and student safety, why did this investigation take almost a year?

2) Why did this investigation consist solely of an exchange of letters between the Nursing Council, the principal of Waikato Polytechnic and my head of department?

3) Why, in the results of that investigation, do council not acknowledge that standards were breached before their investigations when this is in fact acknowledged by the principal?

4) What active monitoring of the department has taken place since their investigations?

5) Why, when approached by my lawyer to release copies of all relevant information, did council refuse to release it, stating that they were exempt from the Freedom of Information Act? What on earth would they want to conceal?

There are those who say that I am trying to turn the world of nursing upside down. I want to do more than that. I want to turn it upside down and shake it and shake it. Shake out all the rottenness, the political correctness, the vicious infighting in which nurses treat each other with far less respect and consideration than they treat their clients. I want to shake out the widening gap between nursing theory and nursing practice. I want to shake out the politicking and power games that go on. I want to shake out the obsession with academic achievement and the negative competitiveness that seems to accompany it.

I want to shake out the inordinate emphasis on cultural difference which at Waikato Polytechnic sometimes divides nursing classes into Maori and "non-Maori." While she recognised the importance of cultural difference, Dame Whina Cooper knew that in New Zealand our future lies in concentrating on those qualities that we all share as human beings, rather than focussing exclusively on the cultural differences that separate us. When will nursing academia catch on?

These are some of the issues which led to me "blowing the whistle" and which I now put before you for your consideration.

**Brian Stabb**

Nursing tutor

Department of nursing and health studies  
Waikato Polytechnic

The head of Waikato Polytechnic's nursing and health studies department Rose McEldowney said: Brian Stabb has taken out a personal grievance against the principal of Waikato Polytechnic based around some of the concerns he has expressed in this letter. His alleged concerns, which are disputed,

seem destined to go before a Labour Court hearing.

Because it would prejudice Brian Stabb's chances of a fair hearing, not to mention putting myself in contempt of the Labour Court, I am therefore unable to comment on his claims at this stage.

Nursing Council chairperson Elaine Papps said: The Nursing Council of New Zealand developed its standards for registration of nurses and midwives as requirements which are pre-requisites to registration. Any concerns brought to the council's attention in regard to these standards being compromised are viewed seriously.

The council received a complaint from Mr Stabb in relation to the compromising of two of the council's criteria for standards of entry to the register. Given the nature of these concerns, the full council wished to be advised of the facts relevant to this matter. The council meets four times a year.

In relation to Mr Stabb's concerns, the council required that those persons who had allegations made against them had a right to reply to those allegations. A number of points of clarification were required from Mr Stabb before the specific allegations could be presented to those concerned. Deliberating on the matter, the council took all the information received from a number of sources into account and made a decision based on this information. The council was satisfied that sufficient, appropriate information was obtained for a decision to be made.

This process can be perceived by those who make the initial allegations as prolonged. However the correspondence required and investigations made often take some time. The full council is apprised of the results of any such investigation at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Stabb asks about the continuing monitoring of the standards in respect to Waikato Polytechnic. The council continues to monitor these and a letter to this effect has been written to the head of school of nursing and midwifery, Waikato Polytechnic. It is council policy to communicate with heads of school on any matters which have the potential to compromise registration standards.

A formal audit visit will be conducted by a panel including a council staff member in 1994 under the auspices of NZQA.

In relation to the release of information, the council is not in a position to release the information as it is not subject to the Official Information Act.

In any matters relating to council business, the council is always willing to assist in clarification of any of its policies.