

# Editorial

## Mental health spectres linger

*Tessa Turnbull, editor and Katikati GP*

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Mental health issues affect everyone. As GPs we listen to and counsel people with mental health problems every day. It is likely we have within our families and among our friends, some of the wide gambit of problems we see in our practices. Indeed, the personal experience of supporting friends and family members with problems ranging from anxiety and depression to psychoses and bipolar disorder and the full spectrum of addictions helps us achieve more effective outcomes for our patients. Sadly, it seems we are much less likely to recognise, intervene early and support mental health, abuse and addiction problems in ourselves and our colleagues.

When I was a young teenager my mother developed severe postnatal depression after the birth of her twins and mysteriously vanished to Tokanui Hospital for several weeks. In hindsight it is easy to understand what happened. She had not only a complicated pregnancy and delivery to contend with but several older children demanding attention and needing love, an inflexible religion contraception-wise, a husband burdened with traumatic war experiences and the overshadowing effects of not enough money.

My mother made a good recovery and Tokanui Hospital remained somewhat a place of personal pilgrimage for some of the family. I worked there as a nurse aid one medical student summer. I vividly recall my loss of appetite at the shock of starting work at Tokanui. My job was basic – assisting the patients through their daily routines. My overwhelming memory is of wooden figures who spent their days apathetically sitting in a range of vinyl coated chairs, placed around the walls of otherwise empty rooms and their nights in locked villas and large dormitories. I did not know about dystonia, akathisia and tardive dyskinesia then but that was in the days when chlorpromazine ruled supreme.

One of my sisters spent a lot of time at Tokanui too, but in a more positive role and in more enlightened times. Her role was district inspector or legal advocate acting for mental health patients. She too was intrigued by the ghosts of Tokanui.

Times have changed. Many patients are now integrated successfully into communities. Some families, ours included, discovered previously undisclosed family members as they moved from mental institutions

into community care. It seems hard to believe now that the accepted management of children with varying degrees of intellectual retardation was long term psychiatric incarceration.

So three sisters gladly read, enjoyed and provided comments on *A Gift of Stories. Discovering how to deal with mental illness*. This is a collection of stories and life histories gathered by Julie Leibrich and published by University of Otago Press and the Mental Health Commission. These are honest success stories from a wide range of people, eg, a psychiatrist to some with little education, all speaking from a well perspective. Undoubtably in such a small country many will be personally known or recognised members of local communities. Universally all are damning of their past institutional care. This is a lovely book, positively written and well edited with good quality paper and photographs, but poorly bound. It is a book to reflect on.

And it is interesting to speculate that a similar book in the future may be equally condemning of community based care as we know it now with its lack of resources, poor follow-up and fragmented care, appalling communication and over rigorous interpretation of privacy laws.