

COMMENTARY by **DR RACHEL MAULE, psychiatrist, Justice Department, on the Oakley Inquiry paper.**

I would like to compliment Dr Jensen on his thoughtful paper. My first thought on reading Dr Jensen's paper, and the dissertation on which it was based, was regret that I had not tried to do something similar. But when one is in the middle of events, it is hard to see them in perspective.

I have seen the problem of helping disturbed offenders from both sides of the fence - or yawning chasm as it now sometimes seems. From 1975 to late 1981 I worked in Carrington, where we tried to avoid using psychiatric services in cases where the justice system seemed more appropriate.

Then in 1981 I left Carrington and was employed by the Justice Department working mostly in the prisons and with sentenced people. I began not long before Watene died in Male 3, but some time before the Inquiry and the subsequent blocking of transfers from prison to Oakley. Within the prisons attitudes were very different to those held in Carrington. Staff were inclined to feel that they should only have to handle well-balanced, sensible, hardworking, ordinary "crims". All offenders with emotional and/or mental problems were seen as "nutters" and believed to be most appropriately held in psychiatric hospitals. This view was often kindly meant; prisons, as they were, were seen as most unsuitable places for disturbed people. There was no, and still is little, understanding that psychiatric hospitals have changed greatly in the last two decades, and no longer see their role as a place of incarceration. Because it was firmly believed that all disturbed inmates should be in hospitals, there was no incentive to improve facilities for such inmates within prisons. With Oakley closed to use, and little accommodation available at Lake Alice, there has been some development of improved facilities at Paremoremo. In retrospect, perhaps the process of change could have been faster, and those of us involved could have done more to facilitate it. However, practical changes have to be preceded by attitude changes in people - a laborious procedure.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that emotionally disturbed prisoners causing management problems by and large do not have schizophrenic illnesses. Few people with schizophrenic disorders end up in prison, and of those who do many manage well in low or medium security institutions. They accept regular medication from the nursing staff, and find the structured environment almost a pleasure. Our real problems are with people who do not have an "illness" as such, but who for a variety of reasons have difficulties in adjusting to life. Low intelligence is sometimes a factor. These young people are likely to be impulsive, impatient under constraint, and with a poor self image. They have not managed well in the community, and the pressures of prison add to their misery to such an extent, that they become desperate for any way out - even to the extent of killing themselves.

Those who become so unhappy with life that death seems the best option are disproportionately Maori. Dr Jensen, in his original study, looked at 10 suicides. Of these 10 young men, 2 were European, 2 Islanders and 6 Maori. Without going into statistical proof of significance, this seems disproportionate to the number of Maoris in prison (between 50% and 60%) and certainly grossly disproportionate to their number in the community. I hesitate to advance any reason for this disparity.

I would like to echo Dr Jensen's comments about the nastiness of prisons. People who are reasonably well balanced can manage to survive a prison sentence without too much harm done. But those who are fragile find it very difficult.

Early in the last century many Maori chiefs saw that British justice had quite a number of good points. A universal and fair system seemed desirable. But the British ideas of punishment seemed to them most bizarre. Retribution was fine, and recompense to victims essential. But shutting offenders away for long periods of time seemed bizarre, inhumane, and totally non productive. It is hard to believe they would approve of our 20th century New Zealand custom of confining active young men in concrete boxes with open steel grilles across the front for 16 to 18 hours a day. I accept that Western society has much difficulty in finding alternatives to prison, but we should not persuade ourselves that the present system is satisfactory.