

# Summary of “Understanding Kohitere”

## Background

The “Understanding Kohitere” Research Project was commissioned by the Care Claims and Resolution Team from the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) in order to provide information to assist in considering claims from the former residents of Kohitere Boy’s Training Centre (Kohitere).

The research was to gain an understanding of Kohitere from 1950 to 1985, from the perceptions of people who had direct experience of it, with regard to staff practices, the standard of the residents’ care and the general culture of the organisation.

A senior social researcher conducted the qualitative research on the basis of 94 in-depth interviews.

The research was concerned primarily with individual’s recollections, thoughts and feelings about their time at Kohitere and not with testing the veracity of any such statements. It reflects what people said to a researcher with a guarantee of anonymity and should be considered a record of what people said about their time in Kohitere rather than a factual inquiry

The Ministry believes that being frank and open with information helps those formerly in state care to understand what happened to them and that sharing such information is a part of a meaningful reflection on the treatment of children in state care. There is also a wider public interest in research which paints a frank picture of the child welfare system being publicly available.

The Ministry is committed to dealing with complaints in a principled way and this includes making available what information it can about how the child welfare system operated in the past. In doing this, the Ministry is obliged to balance the public interest in having this information available against the need to respect the privacy and confidentiality of those who contributed to the research. The Report is anonymous but individuals were quoted and are potentially identifiable.

The Ministry is acting in good faith in attempting to balance all the interested parties’ interests. Therefore in fairness to all concerned parties the Ministry has removed or amended text from the Executive Summary and Conclusions in the Report with a view to respecting the privacy of individuals.

The Ministry believes the Summary is a truthful representation of the Report and the removal or amendment of the text has not altered the substance of the Report.

## **Research findings**

### **The Kohitere complex**

The Kohitere complex was set up on the outskirts of Levin. It was an open institution with no fences or gates and comprised a collection of buildings, most of which were purpose built over the years to accommodate increasing resident and staff numbers. The number of resident beds increased from a maximum of 55 in the 1950s to 100 in the 1960s and 110 in the early 1970s. Residents mostly had individual rooms and were initially accommodated in a villa, later named Tui, which eventually accommodated up to 55 residents. Another villa, Kiwi, was built in 1965 to accommodate up to 25 residents. Kiwi was semi-secure, with lock-up doors at each end and four internal lock-up rooms near the duty room. Six cottages, that each housed six residents, were also added. One of these was used as a secure facility prior to Kiwi being built.

A purpose built secure block (Secure) was built in 1967. It accommodated up to 12 residents in individual cells. Each cell had a lockable door and its own toilet. There was a duty room for staff, separate showers and a dining/recreation area. Secure was extremely cold, especially in winter. Other buildings included all those associated with a residence such as a dining room, kitchen, laundry and recreation rooms. The residence also had a sick bay and, later, a dental clinic.

The complex included workshops, a farm and, in the early 1960s, land was bought for the development of a forestry operation (the forestry) which was located some kilometres from the residence. Recreational facilities included sports grounds, a gym, a swimming pool and a camp near the forest. School facilities were also built.

Senior staff lived in houses on the same road as the complex.

The residents' accommodation, excluding Secure, was warm, comfortable and mostly well maintained. However, the external and internal layout of the complex was such that staff could not view all of the residents all of the time. This pertains to both the outdoor and indoor areas. Tui, which had two wings, was especially problematic.

During the 1970s, a Residential Staff Training School was set up in one of Kohitere's buildings. It was not part of Kohitere, but eventually many of Kohitere's staff either attended short training seminars, or undertook a fully certificated training course at the School.

### **The purpose of Kohitere and its programme**

Kohitere was set up to rehabilitate young males who had offended against the law so that they could return to their communities and live good lives. It provided a programme that was strongly focused on training for work, but which also included a wide variety of social activities and, for some residents, secondary schooling.

Most residents followed a working week, similar to what they would have had if working in paid employment. When at work, they were under the supervision of Kohitere instructors who had qualifications and/or experience in their respective areas of work. In the early 1950s, the work was primarily farm based. More trades opportunities were provided in the late 1950s, and forestry was added in the 1960s. Staff employed to do building and maintenance were also instructors and, unofficially, some domestic staff, especially those in the kitchen, acted as such when residents assisted them. More trusted residents nearing the end of their time at Kohitere had paid jobs in the Levin community. Work in the community was a final step in their rehabilitation back into a community environment but was dependent on the number of jobs that could be found.

A wide variety of recreation and sport choices was offered. These depended to a large extent on the residential staff members who were encouraged to pass on their skills and abilities by organising activities around them. Recreation officers at Kohitere, some instructors, and paid tutors, who came in on an hourly basis, supported and added to the activities residential staff offered.

Most of the residential staff, and some instructors, devoted considerable hours of their own time to ensuring that residents were able to compete and engage in sport and other recreational activities. Both residents and staff enjoyed these activities, especially when away from the Kohitere residence. The extent to which sports teams played in local competitions over the years varied, largely because from time to time Kohitere teams were excluded for rough play and/or fighting. The range of, and focus on, non-competitive physical activities grew markedly from the 1970s onwards.

Schooling gradually increased in focus over the 35-year period. While there was always an effort to involve residents who were under the school leaving age of 15 years, this was not always practicable. Initially, there were a few students enrolled with The Correspondence School and tutored by an unqualified residential staff member. School teachers were later employed by the Department of Education, and a school built on site. The schooling hours were flexible, with some residents following a typical school week and others going to school part-time. During the 1970s, the programme was adapted so that all residents, when they first went to Kohitere, were encouraged to go to school for at least for some of the time.

Residents were kept active for most of their time, but usually had some free time immediately after tea, prior to the commencement of the evening activities, and at weekends. Staff had most difficulty ensuring that all residents were safe from other residents during free times.

The following are some examples of the activities provided by Kohitere at different times throughout the 35 year period.

<b>Work</b>	<b>Recreation/Hobbies/ Entertainment</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Life Skills</b>
Farming - shearing, milking, stock care, farm maintenance Carpentry and joinery - building, repairing Painting - new projects and maintenance Forestry - from early 1960s, all aspects from planting to high pruning Gardening - from planning to harvesting Kitchen hand - preparing vegetables, cleaning Plumbing Boiler maintenance Cleaning and grounds maintenance Mechanics (limited) A range of jobs in the local community for residents who were nearing the end of their stay at Kohitere Voluntary community work Army training	Most sports - both competitive and informal Other recreational activities - camping, climbing, kayaking, swimming (pool, river, beach), tramping, pig hunting, eeling, trampolining, gymnasium based (e.g. weights) Outings - beach, mountains, church, social visits, skating, movies Cultural - marae visits, Maori carving, art, informal singing and guitar playing, Maori concerts, visits from performing artists Trips - Wellington Hobbies - leathercraft, joinery, pottery TV, movies at the residence, card games, bingo Dances to which girls were bussed in Gala day - put on by Kohitere for Levin residents	Emphasis on schooling increased to include all residents in the early 1970s, prior to which it mainly concentrated on those under the age of 15, the official school leaving age at the time. Before the school was built and teachers were employed, residents were enrolled with The Correspondence School	Several different programmes attempted to include health care and the skills such as basic cooking, finances, needed for living independently. A health programme taught through the school to all new residents was later developed.

Although there was a wide range of activities available, some of the jobs in the complex and some activities were behaviour dependent, and some instructors would not accept some residents in their group. Also, in some years there were fewer activities and less encouragement of residents to take part. These two factors meant that some of the most problematic residents were not involved in many of the positive activities at Kohitere.

Counselling was also included in the programme. Residents were expected to receive this in the course of day-to-day contact with residential staff, but for most of the time there was also a qualified counsellor on the staff who counselled a small number of residents. The extent to which residents were counselled depended to a large extent on the focus of the principal. Up to the late 1960s, it was a consistent focus and one which the second principal spent considerable time coaching staff to do. However, from the early 1970s, the focus was more on keeping residents active, and counselling by residential staff had to fit around this.

While the main focus of the programme was to keep residents occupied in worthwhile activities that kept them too busy to misbehave, other discipline and control methods were also used. A points and privilege systems operated throughout the research period to encourage good behaviour, albeit with greater or lesser emphasis at different times. The most consistent practice was the withdrawal of privileges for poor behaviour such as violence, absolute

refusal to co-operate and absconding. For example, residents who misbehaved during the week would have their pocket money docked, or not be allowed to go on outings outside of Kohitere that weekend. After the second villa and the cottages were built, residents were motivated to improve their behaviour by earning enough points to move from the semi secure Kiwi villa to the more open Tui, and then into the cottages, which had considerably less supervision. While moving into a cottage remained a privilege, during the 1970s, the system of starting in Kiwi and progressing to Tui was dropped, and new residents went into either villa.

Physical punishment in the form of a strap or cane was rarely used, although senior staff and, at times, only the principals were permitted to punish this way. Other staff members were not allowed to physically punish residents, and this was made clear by all principals. However, it was not always possible for management to keep complete control, especially once staff and resident numbers grew. Generally physical violence perpetrated by staff on residents appears to have occurred rarely, possibly once or twice a month. At any given time only one or two residential staff members would have been involved. When it occurred it was in circumstances where there were no witnesses.

One staff member at Kohitere took it on himself to punch residents by way of physical chastisement. He reached a senior role which gave him considerable influence over the atmosphere of the organisation. Some staff looked up to him because of his positive characteristics and ability to get things done, but others found him overbearing and controlling. Throughout most of his time at Kohitere, he appears to have occasionally punched residents, although it was difficult for management to prove.

Problems with forestry staff physically disciplining residents became more apparent during the 1970s, with one instructor receiving a reprimand from the Department's Head Office for kicking a resident in the buttocks. He was in the habit of doing this when he caught residents bullying other residents. Other forestry instructor behaviours included pushing residents down a hill. This was known as flying lessons and was generally treated as a joke by residents, leading residential staff to believe it was not an issue. However, there was a macho culture in the forestry, and residents who went there tended to develop pride in being able to cope with it. There was, therefore, a strong incentive to put up with such treatment and not complain.

Once Secure was built it was used to keep residents safe, for behaviour change and, to a lesser extent, for punishment. However, most residents who went to Kohitere did not spend any time in Secure.

It was also used for remand residents who were sent to Kohitere to be held in Secure pending trial. One young resident was sent to Secure at Kohitere long term because there was nowhere else suitable for him.

Views on the length of time residents spent in Secure varied widely. This is partly because there was not always a clear distinction between the remand

residents and other residents who were sent there for periods of time during their stay at Kohitere.

Secure was generally used for short stays while staff were trying to settle residents who were misbehaving. However, some non remand residents did spend several weeks in Secure. Only senior staff could admit residents to Secure. There were tight controls around how long residents could be there, and all admissions and releases were recorded. Meetings of management and residential staff were held to discuss whether or not residents in Secure were ready to leave. Residents were not released if they continued to misbehave while being held. Additional controls were placed around the use of secure units in boys' homes throughout the country after a 1982 Human Rights Commission report.

At times, a programme was delivered to the residents in Secure. This was particularly, but not only, when there were long-term residents who were sent to Kohitere to be placed in the unit and who were not allowed to mix with the other Kohitere residents. The programme included schooling, art, counselling and exercise. Some Secure residents also went to work and exercise outside of the unit. However, some Secure residents who had been put in there from Kohitere itself recalled being retained in their cells for long periods, and only being allowed out for exercise, showers, and some cleaning duties.

Although the exercise for those in Secure was not supposed to be punishment, some staff treated it as such and pushed residents to a point of complete exhaustion. Generally, resident participants considered that staff treated them well in Secure. However, they were left locked in their cells at times when there were no staff on duty.

The length of time residents spent at Kohitere initially depended on their progress. However, because of extra demand, beginning in the late 1960s, Kohitere was forced to put residents through the programme more quickly. The average length of stay which, prior to this time, had been just over 12 months, reduced to just over eight months. New residents tended to unsettle the residence, making control and discipline more difficult. This happened especially if several arrived at one time and, combined with increasingly difficult residents going to Kohitere, created increased stress for both staff and residents.

### **The characteristics of Kohitere's residents and their impact on Kohitere**

Kohitere catered mainly for 14 to 17 year olds whose behaviour was such that they could no longer be accommodated locally. Therefore, they came from all over New Zealand. Participants considered Kohitere to be the last chance before borstal, and residents were considered to be the most problematic in the country in their age group.

The following characteristics of the residents impacted on life at Kohitere for both residents and staff:

- Many residents had been in local Boys' Homes and had already learned not to inform on either other residents or staff for fear of reprisal. This made it difficult for staff to find out if residents were being bullied by other residents or, to a lesser extent, by staff. A hierarchical pecking order among residents and bullying were the main contributing factors to residents being abused while at Kohitere and the most difficult aspect of Kohitere for staff to control. While this research project was not tasked with quantifying the level of bullying, it appears that it fluctuated over time, depending on the ability of individual staff members to contain it, and the particular group of residents at any one time. However, it also appears to have become more prevalent during and after the late 1970s. Physical attacks took place quickly, and there were ample opportunities to perpetrate attacks out of view of staff.
- There was a considerable size difference between the youngest and oldest residents owing to the amount of growth that takes place in boys of the residents' ages. This made smaller residents vulnerable to larger residents. Various practices put in place to protect smaller, more vulnerable residents were only partially successful. Essentially, it was impossible to protect all of the residents all of the time, and when some residents were intent on hurting others, the opportunity eventually arose for them to do so.
- Throughout the research period, the seriousness of the crimes some residents committed prior to going to Kohitere increased, while residents continued to be sent there for relatively minor crimes, such as car burglary and theft. This meant relatively naïve residents were being put into an open environment with more sophisticated, cunning and violent residents.
- Residents who were violent and who could not be safely contained locally were sent to Kohitere which was primarily an open institution. Absconding and the safety of other residents were ongoing risks.
- Some residents had become accustomed to being locked up on their own at previous institutions and had come to prefer this to being exposed to the other residents. Thus, they were not always well motivated to keep out of Secure at Kohitere, and some purposely misbehaved so that they would be put there.
- Residents who had been abused by family, caregivers or by staff at other boys' homes prior to going to Kohitere had a deep mistrust of adults. Some were extremely wary and fearful, and one small threatening incident by a staff member could create a high level of anxiety. Most residents were difficult for staff to work with until they had built a degree of trust.
- The comparatively small number of European residents from the South Island, who had had little contact with Maori, were put into an institution dominated by larger, Maori residents. Some European residents were intimidated by this. The Maori/European imbalance was reversed for a small time early in the research period.
- Residents were sent to Kohitere from all over the country. For those who came from far away, ongoing contact with their communities was disrupted. It

was difficult for families and field social workers to visit. The introduction during the 1970s of three leave periods each year during school holidays was intended to help keep residents in touch with their communities. Only a small number of residents were deemed unsuitable for leave.

- By the late 1970s, many residents had been living rough before they were sent to Kohitere. They took related health and hygiene issues to Kohitere with them. Many had not learnt basic self-care skills and had to be taught such basics as finger-nail cutting and teeth cleaning before they could begin to respond to the programme.
- Solvent abuse issues were brought into Kohitere during the 1970s and continued to be an issue within the institution.
- By the late 1970s, some of the new residents had gang affiliations, and this became a source of control and bullying among residents.
- Most residents' schooling had been disrupted long before going to Kohitere. Enticing them back into schooling was difficult and for those that did attend the school, teachers had to concentrate on filling educational gaps rather than teaching the usual curriculum for the age group.
- Some of the residents appeared mentally ill and that Kohitere was not the right place for them. Visiting professionals assessed on an as needed basis, and some residents were moved to institutions for the mentally ill. However, the behaviour of some residents was unpredictable and volatile.
- Some residents had behaviour problems. Several staff felt that whereas many of the Maori residents from the north who had been living rough were sent to Kohitere for survival crimes, such as stealing food, the European residents from the south tended to have behaviour problems that were generally not well managed or understood by staff. These residents tended to get picked on by both staff and other residents.
- Many Maori residents, especially by the 1970s, did not know their whakapapa, and it was felt that this made them more susceptible to the negative influence of their peers. Kohitere began attempts to track residents' whakapapa during the 1970s.
- Some residents were thought to have been used as rent boys prior to going to Kohitere and the occasional effeminate residents to use sexual favours as a means of controlling other residents in Kohitere. Some participants recalled that there was a level of sexual activity among residents while others believed that there was none. Some also felt that there may have been some non-consensual activity in that a dominant resident might try to control a more subservient resident. Although none of the residents acknowledged personal experience of this, some did acknowledge masturbating games.

## Management and staff

The principal of Kohitere had overall responsibility for the day-to-day operation of Kohitere which was governed by the Child Welfare Division of the Department of Education until 1972 when the new Department of Social Welfare took responsibility. While the Departments' Head Offices set the administrative rules, such as dictating shifts, staff numbers and resources, there was little guidance on how to handle many of the issues that arose with residents and the principal was, at least until the 1980s, given a relatively free hand. There were, however, clear rules surrounding, for example, the use and documentation of punishments.

There were four main principals during the research period. Acting principals managed the institution for some months between principals. On the whole Kohitere was run in a way that was progressive and focused on the best interests of the residents.

At the beginning of the research period, there was one assistant principal role which was not filled. The number of assistant principals increased to two when the organisation increased in size. One of the assistant principals tended to oversee staff and training, whereas the other had a more administrative role. These positions were filled by people who were more highly qualified than the residential staff and who had a role in mentoring, guiding and disciplining staff. By the 1980s, expectations from Head Office were becoming more directive and were more in keeping with the then assistant principals' expectations than the principals'. There was also a senior team. This included:

- The counsellor, the first of whom was employed during the 1960s. The counsellors were tertiary qualified and had a role in mentoring staff. Other duties included providing input and oversight of the programme, investigating complaints made by residents, counselling some of Kohitere's residents and visiting/overseeing some of the residents in Secure.
- The head matron, who was responsible for the general health and wellbeing of the residents and for running the sick bay from which medications were dispensed. The focus of this role changed in 1980 when a registered nurse was employed to provide a nursing clinic and a health programme for residents. Initially, the head matron was the only female on the senior team.
- Senior residential staff. These staff members were senior housemasters until the grading changed during the 1970s and residential staff were put on the same grade as field social workers. They then became senior residential social workers. Each senior residential staff member was responsible for a number of residential social workers and assistant residential social workers, under the supervision of the assistant managers. They were in charge of the whole institution when on duty outside of the standard working week that the management team worked, for example, early morning, late afternoon and weekends. They oversaw the development of residents' plans and progress and were ultimately responsible for the residents' reports that were written by

the residential social workers. Some of the senior residential social workers had been at Kohitere for many years and, although highly experienced, tended to have a narrow focus, having come up through the ranks of the residential staff. During the 1970s, some more highly qualified senior staff were employed.

- The chief instructor and the chief forester were on the senior team but were less involved with it than the other members and were often unable to attend meetings owing to other commitments. They tended to be somewhat reluctant to take on social work philosophies, preferring to operate in a more traditional employer role. They were therefore not vehicles through which ongoing training for the instructors could be passed.

- The head teacher was also invited to attend meetings, although he was usually absent because of teaching duties.

The other residential staff were housemasters and general attendants. Later there were also assistant housemasters. During the 1970s they became residential social workers and assistant residential social workers. Housemasters/residential social workers had case loads for which they were responsible.

Residential staff members came from a range of backgrounds and were often chosen because of their involvement in sport. There was little training for residential staff prior to the 1970s. Teaching was a common background of the more qualified staff that Kohitere attracted.

During the 1970s, there was a push to employ more Maori residential staff. While some came in with a good standard of education and took advantage of the considerable education and training that was, by then, available to Kohitere staff, others lacked formal education.

Attracting suitable staff to a residential institution was a challenge, and, for the most part, principals had to work hard to inculcate new staff with suitable attitudes and behaviours.

However, a number of career-minded residential staff were attracted to Kohitere as housemasters (prior to there being senior housemaster roles) by the principal's reputation as an enlightened leader. They tended to stay for a few years before moving to higher positions in other organisations. Some of the residential staff came from the Levin community and joined the organisation as lower ranked general attendants. They had little formal education and the convenience and attraction of a government position in their area meant that they tended to stay at Kohitere for many years. Some moved into more senior positions within Kohitere.

Some staff also lacked the understanding and behaviours required to work with the residents and struggled, despite receiving training at the onsite Residential Staff Training School. They were watched over by the principal, offered advice on how to handle matters and monitored.

By the late 1960s/ early 1970s certain factors, such as lack of strong management and an older authoritarian element amongst more senior staff, led to staff not reporting on more senior staff who hit residents (or being ostracised if they did) . Some staff left the institution as a result.

Residents tended not to complain about residential staff for fear of further reprisals. They were not aware of a formal complaints system but mostly knew who they would talk to if they were hit.

The night staff were initially somewhat remote figures that came in during the evenings and had little else to do with the institution. Some were caught sleeping on the job. They conducted several rounds each night and kept a record of all activity during the evening. Some residents complained of being fondled by a night watchman. A night watchman was dealt with by the police, but the research wasn't able to confirm one way or the other that this matched individuals' accounts. As well as being too scared to complain about staff, a resident who was abused by the night watchman was too ashamed to admit it at the time.

During the 1970s, some new night staff also did occasional day shifts and shifts in Secure, and were included in staff training.

Apart from the night-watchman, a housemaster, who had not long been at Kohitere, was the only other residential staff member suspected over the 35 years covered by the research of sexually interfering with a resident (although a domestic staff member was dismissed from Kohitere for having an apparent consensual but inappropriate relationship with a resident). This resident made an accusation during the early part of the research period that could not be proved. However, the resident was believed and the housemaster left after being spoken to by the principal.

With the change to social worker status of residential staff and the subsequent pay increases, Kohitere began to attract qualified social workers and this, combined with the support from assistant principals and counsellors with social work qualifications, led to the undermining of the older, authoritarian element. Women were also employed for the first time as residential staff and this led to a less macho environment.

Overall, despite the difficulty in finding suitable residential staff over the years, most of the residential staff were well-intentioned. Many had a natural affinity for the work and had strong personal qualities that meant that they were particularly good with the residents. Many worked extremely long hours and were highly dedicated to providing residents with a good programme. The sports-minded staff greatly enjoyed their involvement with the residents and found sports to be a good way to engage with them. Others involved residents in their other personal interests such as eeling, tramping, art and music. Many related well to the residents and found the time to discuss issues that were important to them. Residents from the early days recalled their stay there with

great fondness and attributed much of their success in life to lessons learnt from kindly residential staff at Kohitere. Later residents generally found a staff member with whom they could talk and, with exceptions, found them to be respectful and capable.

Former staff participants tended to feel that less than 20 percent of the residential staff were not fully dedicated. Some believed that no staff residential members hit residents, but those that did felt that hard hitting may have been done by two at most at any one time. During the late 1960s/early 1970s period, cuffs under the ear may have been given by more than a couple of staff. Senior residential staff did not condone such behaviour by less senior staff, even when they acted in such a way themselves.

The instructors at Kohitere were employed for their trade skills and their ability to relate to the residents. They provided role-models in a work situation. While they reported to the chief instructor or the chief forester, residential staff were responsible for following up any issues with their treatment of residents and occasionally rebuked instructors for harsh treatment of residents. Some instructors were taken to task by the assistant principals and the principal. Instructors were often experienced in working with young men through having apprentices and having worked in some tough environments. They were generally unfazed by some of the residents' behaviour. They tended to treat residents as they saw fit and this was mainly beneficial for the residents. Most instructors were old enough to have raised families, and that gave them valuable insights into adolescent behaviour. Some of the forestry instructors were steeped in Maori culture which they passed on to residents. Overall, the instructors related well to residents and passed on considerable life and work skills. The residents generally enjoyed their instructors' company and enjoyed listening to their stories during breaks.

Most of the instructors expected a good day's work out of the residents, particularly on the farm and in the forestry where the work was dictated by the weather and seasonal requirements, and was sometimes hard. Instructors worked alongside them and were reasonable in their expectations. The residents were generally thought to have less work to do than if they had been in outside organisations.

However, forestry work and some of the farming work, particularly shearing, was physically tough, and the residents were generally not fit for it when they arrived at Kohitere. As their fitness developed and their physical shape improved with the development of strong muscles, residents took great pride in their changed appearance and increased strength.

The forestry environment was particularly macho, and some forestry staff took it on themselves to physically punish residents who misbehaved. This was well-intentioned as the instructors wanted the residents to learn something in the forestry rather than going to Secure where they would learn nothing. However, the punishment was inappropriate.

Occasionally forestry staff also hit residents, and residents who did not keep up or did not plant in a straight line were pushed down a hill and made to quickly run back up. This was known jokingly as *flying lessons*.

A recurring theme with instructors, especially from the farm and forestry, was that firm discipline was necessary when working with volatile residents who were using dangerous tools that could be used as weapons. Several felt that some assistant principals and housemasters did not understand their situation and that their methods of discipline did not take this into account. However, other instructors had little need to discipline residents and generally managed to get them involved in the work at hand.

The kitchen staff also played an important part in some residents' time at Kohitere. Residents were sent to the kitchen to help as part of the programme. While it was a busy time, and staff had little time to stop and chat with residents, there was a lot of laughter and fun and residents tended to remember the kitchen staff fondly.

### **Staff shifts**

The residence was staffed by different shifts that covered the hours from 6.00 a.m. to 10.00 and, later, 11.00 p.m. Evening staff came on at 10.00 p.m., and residents were supposed to be well settled for the night by then.

With the many different activities underway during out-of-work time and up to lights out at around 9.00 p.m., the ratio of staff to residents on duty at any one time was difficult to assess. Generally, staff who were leading particular activities were responsible for less than 12 residents. However, there were some instances when the resident numbers were up to 120 (10 over capacity) and staff felt that they were largely responsible for up to 50 residents. They did not feel safe from residents in such situations.

Theoretically, when all of the residents were within the immediate residential complex, there was a senior overseeing the whole complex, two to three residential social workers and two assistant residential social workers. However, some staff absented themselves without their co-workers knowing where they were, while the senior staff member would be in an office some distance from the villas. Also, residential social workers were sometimes occupied in the office in the villas, leaving only one staff member to supervise residents in each of the villas.

When Secure was occupied, there were supposed to be two staff on duty there. However, for much of the time there were staff shortages that reduced the number to only one. At times Secure was also left without supervision. The main impact of staff shortages in Secure was that residents had to stay in their cells because staff were only supposed to let them out of their cells if there were two staff present.

From the time the second villa was built until the 1970s, only two night-watchmen were on duty at night. They were also responsible for the cottages and Secure, and had to leave the villas unsupervised when they did the rounds of those buildings. Eventually, a third night-watchman was employed for Secure, but the villa night-watchmen still had to leave their villas to check the cottages.

### **General care**

Throughout the 35 year period, residents were well cared for with regard to food, accommodation, clothing and medical and dental care. The exception to this was Secure which was exceptionally cold. Residents did not have adequate warm clothing during the day when their bedding was removed. A local general medical practitioner was on call at all times and paid regular visits to Kohitere. Some of the matrons were also registered nurses. Residents were medically assessed, either prior to going to Kohitere, or on their arrival there, and any health issues discovered were dealt with. Residents were originally taken to a dentist in Levin. When a dental surgery was set up at Kohitere, the dentist visited weekly.

Psychiatric services were provided from Lake Alice hospital, and a psychiatrist was available in Palmerston North. Educational psychologists also assessed residents.

### **Other visitors and the Levin community**

The principals of Kohitere put considerable effort into involving the Levin community with Kohitere, and many of its members took residents on outings or came into the complex to provide hobbies or religious education. In 1983, a Visiting Committee with four members was established by the Department to provide outside contacts for residents. Their names and contact telephone numbers were placed on several notice boards around the residence. They were free to walk around Kohitere, without giving notice, and talk to residents. They were invited to sit in on meetings called to discuss residents who were being held in Secure.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- The research found that Kohitere was a well-intentioned institution that, particularly during the 1950s and most of the 1960s, was run in an extremely enlightened manner. During this time the environment was non-punitive and positive and one in which residents could flourish.
- Throughout the research period staff were mostly dedicated and hard working, but it was not always possible to recruit suitable staff, and some needed considerable mentoring to provide the care expected by the principals. Some staff hit or kicked residents.

- Although not quantified by this research, it appears that most residents went through Kohitere without being physically punished by staff.
- A small number of residents appear to have been sexually fondled by staff. As discussed above this is primarily attributable to one night-watchman.
- Bullying by fellow residents was the main source of abuse of residents and became increasingly rife for a number of reasons. Some staff were unqualified for the job and did not understand underlying issues of bullying, it was impossible to observe all residents at all times, residents rarely marked on a bully, and residents were admitted with increasing levels of criminal behaviour.
- During the late 1960s/early 1970s the combined effect of residents being sent to the institution who had committed more serious crimes, new management and the more frequent turnover of residents owing to increased demand led to the development of a less positive environment. Staff struggled to cope with residents' worsening behaviour and some lacked the skills required to deal with this and the difficulties this caused in the residence. This led to residents' experience of Kohitere during this time being considerably less positive and more frightening than those in previous times.
- Despite the problems during the 1960s/early 1970s, many of the positive elements developed under the previous principal continued, and some residential staff continued to provide positive experiences for residents. Instructors carried on as previously and residents enjoyed their time in their jobs. Also, the counsellor at the time managed to assert some positive influence.
- A new principal in the early 1970s controlled staff better, increased positive activities for residents and placed a greater emphasis on health issues and schooling. More training for staff also became available through the onsite Residential Staff Training School. However, finding suitable staff remained a problem, particularly prior to the upgrading of residential staff positions that made them equal to those of field social workers. While clearly unacceptable, some staff still hit residents, and this was only kept under partial control by this principal and the assistant principals.
- While the new management in the 1970s was well intentioned, the focus on the provision of new and positive experiences was at the expense of counselling. This focus also meant there was less time for staff to deal with serious bullying issues and spend time with residents working through ways to improve their behaviour. Visible signs of bullying were dealt with, but not the underlying problems.
- Given staff ratios, the level of staff qualifications and the extremely antisocial behaviour of some residents from the early 1970s, it is questionable whether such an institution could provide the intensive programme required to change the attitudes and behaviour of its most difficult residents. While many residents responded to the privilege system, regular routines, good general

care, learning skills and the experience of working with positive role models in a work situation, other residents were less responsive and continued to attack other residents.

- Staff and residents' recall of programmes in Secure differed. Staff indicated that good programmes were in place, particularly when there were long-term residents contained there. Residents recalled being mostly locked in their cells other than for exercise periods that were held in the courtyard. To some extent, the residents' lack of involvement with a programme was because their self-confessed continually aggressive behaviour would have made it inappropriate to let them out into the recreation area to take part in group activities. However, there was a shortage of Secure staff which also affected the amount of time residents could be allowed out of their cells.
- Secure was not always occupied after the early 1970s. When occupancy was low, numbers made resourcing difficult as staff were too busy elsewhere.
- There was increasing concern over the use of Secure units throughout the country during the late 1970s. Changes were introduced in the early 1980s, particularly with regard to the length of time residents were allowed to be contained in Secure units without internal and external reviews.
- Some residents were sent to Kohitere because of their continual running away and serious criminal offending. However, Kohitere was an open institution designed for rehabilitation rather than containment. Some residents needed to be contained while being rehabilitated, and Secure was not an adequate building for this purpose. Thus, Kohitere was not suitable for the most problematic residents sent there.