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MAINTAINING SAFETY

The Social Support and Monitoring of Men who Have Completed Therapy for Sexual Offending

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Abstract

This study enquired into the social support and monitoring of men who had offended sexually against children, and who had completed therapy at the Kia Marama Special Treatment Unit, Rolleston Prison, Christchurch. The current literature regarding treatment for sexual offending was identified as largely drawn from the discipline of psychology. From that perspective it tends to focus on personal characteristics and behavioural patterns of the individual who offends. Therapeutic processes are described in detail. However from the perspective of social work, it was observed that inadequate attention has been paid to the social context in which these men live, and must maintain their therapy gains. These men benefit from significant professional intervention: they participate in intensive therapy at Kia Marama, and following their release they receive valuable oversight and support from Probation Officers as they reintegrate back into the community. However support from more "natural" social systems, which may include families or whanau, friends, neighbours, work colleagues or church groups, is noted in social work literature as being vital in the longer term maintenance of behavioural change.

In this study the post-treatment life experience of a group of men, who had completed therapy at Kia Marama, was examined from a social-ecological perspective. Although this perspective accounted for both the men's immediate social situations and the wider policy and cultural contexts, the predominant focus was on the functioning of their immediate social support networks. The ideal role of social support networks is twofold: it is important that the men are able to build close, open and supportive relationships with other adults. However support

network members also have a vital function of being aware of the men's offending patterns, and situations that may present a risk of further offending, and monitoring their behaviour from the basis of this awareness.

The study found that social support was highly valued by the men as assisting them to lead safe and non-abusive lifestyles. Information sharing within support networks was identified as vital for ongoing safety. However there was considerable variation in the levels of information sharing and ongoing contact between the professionals responsible for the men's therapy and parole oversight, and their "natural" support networks. Inadequate sharing of specific offence related information, and lack of ongoing communication, were found to be associated with confusion about risk issues and compromised safety. The findings of this study suggest the need for more consistent processes of ongoing co-ordination and communication within support networks, particularly between formal and informal systems.

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