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Community Attitudes Toward People with Mental Illness:
The Effects of Time, Location and Demographic Variables

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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AMBER WAKEFIELD
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Deinstitutionalisation in New Zealand followed the worldwide trend of transferring mentally ill patients from psychiatric institutions into community-based care. The closure of psychiatric hospitals in favour of community care relied on positive and accepting attitudes of community members. At the time of the closure of Lake Alice psychiatric hospital in 1995, the remaining 12 chronically mentally ill patients were transferred into a community mental health facility in Wanganui. The present study investigated whether community attitudes towards mental illness change over time and if attitudes are influenced by geographical proximity to community mental health facilities. The study also investigated the influence of demographic variables, and prior contact, awareness and agreement with the community mental health facility on attitudes. Attitudes among the Wanganui community were measured by survey using the Opinions about Mental Illness scale (OMI, Cohen & Struening, 1959) and the Comfort in Interaction Scale (CI, Beckwith & Mathews, 1994). There were two samples used in the present study, one taken in 1995 comprising of one hundred and fifty seven respondents, and one taken in 1996 comprising of one hundred and forty-one respondents. Time was found to be a partially significant influence on attitudes among the respondents. Geographical proximity was not found to be significant. The results were consistent with the hypothesis that time, awareness of the community mental health facility, occupation and prior contact with people who have a mental illness produced a significant effect on attitudes toward people with mental illness among community members. Overall, attitudes as measured by the OMI and CI were positive and accepting of people with a mental illness.
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