

Social Work in New Zealand: Not for the Faint-Hearted

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New Zealand has a shortage of skilled workers in various professions, primarily in the fields of health and information technology, caused in part by approximately one-fifth of the population leaving the country after graduation to work overseas. Recognizing that this created an opportunity to practice social work overseas, towards the end of 2003, I posted a note on the "Working In New Zealand ERA" web page stating my interest. In January 2004, I received an enquiry from the Waikato District Health Board (WDHB) in Hamilton and, shortly thereafter, I was invited to apply for a position with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). I was interviewed and offered the job by telephone and, following a visit to New Zealand in March/April, I returned there in June (having obtained a two-year Work Visa), and began working in July.

Working in another country and learning about another culture is not for the faint-hearted, and the first three months were quite daunting. While I was provided with motel accommodation for the first few weeks and the use of a WDHB work car, I was left entirely to my own devices to find and furnish a house, and purchase a car. I was also left to develop the job by myself. I had minimum collegial support, no peer or other supervision, and no guidelines except a library of mental health services policies and procedures. One of these is The Blueprint for Mental Health Services in New Zealand which has the Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi) as its founding document. It emphasizes strongly the need for a recovery approach in the delivery of services, the importance of meeting the mental health needs of Maori because mental illness is now the number one health concern for Maori, and specific cultural considerations for Pacific people. Cultural practices, including spiritual healing, are becoming quite mainstream.

I am based in Tokoroa, an old logging town of 13,000 in central North Island where there is the largest population of Maori and Pacific Islanders and the highest rate of unemployment. Those who have jobs are working primarily in forestry and farming. CAMHS provides assessment and treatment for children, adolescent, and youth with serious mental health disorders, suspected psychiatric disorders, and/or psychological disorders including severe emotional and behavioral disorders. I often spend only two days a week in Tokoroa as I cover a large rural area and travel up to two and a half hours each way to rural clinics.

A lot of what Maori have experienced is very similar to the Alaska Native cultures. Social, economic, and cultural changes swept away the economic foundations of village life, increased the incidence of alcoholism and violence, and triggered many other social problems. As in Alaska, child sexual abuse is not uncommon, with the populations of small towns and villages closing their ranks when a case is investigated. Drinking during pregnancy also appears to be quite accepted. However,

unlike in Alaska where there is much education and awareness of the risks of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), this is not the case in New Zealand, and even leading members of the medical community do not agree on its causes. Job training and skill development in workforce development projects have so far been insufficient to make workers competitive in the private labor market. And the Maori organizations that were created did not all thrive because they often lacked experienced managers leading to poor financial conditions and dissipation of Maori wealth rather than its protection.

Social Work in New Zealand is not very different to Social Work in Alaska—long hours, lack of resources, old equipment, and intrigue of colleagues who don't pull their weight are aspects of working in New Zealand that any social worker in Alaska will relate to. Human services work seems not to be highly valued, and this may have something to do with the fact that many social workers do not possess university degrees, but certificates and diplomas from polytechnics and institutes of technology, so are not considered to be professional. Master's degrees appear to be quite rare. The New Zealand Association of Social Workers has been working toward a system of accountability for the past ten years and now, in order to become a full member, one must undergo an assessment of one's practice competency. In addition, social workers will soon be required to become registered. I am also receiving clinical supervision from a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in Alaska and hope to receive permission for this to count toward my own licensing when I return.

In summary, New Zealand is a wonderful place to live and work and have an OE (overseas experience). With only a very few exceptions, everyone I have met has been exceedingly friendly and welcoming. Some of those working in the mental health profession have developed a quirky sense of humor which is not always PC but intended to relieve stress. This is demonstrated by a Christmas carol to the tune of "On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me" with alternative words such as "a borderline with PTSD."

We have a lovely little house with large lawns and lots of trees and flowers in a peaceful area of town with the best neighbors anyone could ever hope for. In the yard are several varieties of rhododendron, one of which must be 30 feet high and, when covered with bright pink blossoms, the leaves cannot be seen. In the neighborhood, there are cacti coexisting with ferns, fir trees, maples, yucca, palms, oak, every imaginable fruit tree and vine, tulips and roses. One of the climbing roses in our yard is almost 20 feet tall. Our grapefruit tree drops 10-12 fruit daily and our lemon tree about half that. A huge bamboo thicket across the rear of our lot is home to thousands of birds. The sound at dawn and dusk is impressive. One of the best things about Tokoroa is a total absence of stop lights. Once you learn the "roundabout" routine, you are not much impeded by the narrow roads. Looking out the window, I can see skies that are bluer than the bluest skies in Seattle as we don't have much ozone filtering it. On an afternoon like this you can get sunburned in 15 minutes or less. There are a lot of other good things about Aotearoa (New Zealand), but you need to have a look-see for yourself. There is something for everyone, but hop to as summer is almost over.