



An old debate is reignited

The slaying of Hamilton woman Diane White has reignited concerns over the placing of mental health patients and juvenile offenders in the community. It is alleged a woman being treated for mental illness committed the crime, a neighbour who was receiving voluntary treatment at the Henry Bennett centre in Hamilton.

Hamilton has been here before, most recently with opposition to the siting and subsequent opening of the youth justice facility Te Hurihanga in Hillcrest. There were protests in the late 1990s when it was announced Waikato Hospital would house the successor to Tokanui mental hospital – the Henry Rongomau Bennett Centre. Hamilton city councillor Roger Hennebry was among those to raise concerns about mental health patient placements last week, arguing neighbours should know if there are “serious issues”. “If they came and lived next door to me I would be bloody wild if I didn’t know because at least I can make allowances and try and help,” he said.

But therein lies the rub. What is a serious issue? John Kirwan most certainly had serious mental issues, so much so that he has become a poster boy for mental health. League star Paul Whatuira bashed two passers-by and was locked in a secure psychiatric unit in Bradford last October. He went through problems Kirwan could relate to, but reacted differently.

Kirwan and Whatuira are dealing with their conditions in the public eye. But what about anyone else who has been helped by mental health services? At what point does someone’s depression become a “serious issue” – and who would make the decision? And how can a Kirwan case be differentiated from a Whatuira one? Mental health patients are no more predictable than any other people. Many who go to the Henry Bennett centre do so voluntarily, because the help there enables them to continue functioning effectively. To expose them to public stigma and suspicion at a time when they are coping with the illness would be unfair and ultimately of no public service.

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand chief Judi Clements says one in five New Zealanders experience a mental illness and a survey showed 89 per cent of New Zealanders wanted to support people with mental illness. Part of that support, she says, in-



cludes allowing treatment for mental illness to occur in natural settings where people can begin their recovery journey without feeling singled out. The issue boils down to the level of confidence the community can have that people dealing with the mentally unwell will make sound decisions on where they should live.

With Diane White's family farewelling her today, their confidence will be zero. Others should, though, try and hold their judgment. Let's see what police, who were alerted to a possible problem before the killing, and the hospital, where the alleged killer was being treated but walked away from, have to say about how they handled the case. Transparency is the only way this community can be assured all is being done to keep them safe.