

Mental illness ban shames Olympic spirit

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The Mental Health Foundation hopes that Olympic spirit will shame Chinese authorities into reconsidering a rule which bans people with mental illness from entering China as visitors.

All New Zealand citizens travelling on a New Zealand passport need to obtain a visa before travelling to mainland China. According to official guidelines published on the Beijing 2008 website, you can be refused entry to China if you “have mental illness, AIDS, venereal disease, or epidemic diseases like open TB.”

“The Olympic spirit is all about taking part,” says Judi Clements, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation. “It is a cruel blow for sportspeople and spectators to be excluded purely because they experience mental illness, which affects around 1 in 5 people in New Zealand alone.

“This exclusion is even more destructive when you know that participation in sporting activities has been shown to aid people in recovery from mental illness. Our focus should be on recovery, not rejection.”

Adrian Panozzo is Chief Executive Officer of RecLink Australia, an organisation that uses sport and the arts to transform the lives of individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage.

Visiting New Zealand this week for the Fourth Mental Health Promotion Hui Aotearoa, organised by the Mental Health Foundation, Panozzo says the Chinese policy is a missed opportunity:

“One of the values chosen by organisers of the Beijing Olympics includes the creation of a harmonious people and society. The next two weeks gives the world an opportunity to show understanding and goodwill toward the many people affected by issues affecting mental wellbeing.”

A number of high profile athletes have publicly discussed their own issues with mental illness in recent times, including former All Black John Kirwan and Australian cricketer Shaun Tait.

“This shows that even our brightest and best are not immune to mental health issues. There are likely to be participants from all countries in this year’s Games who have experienced mental illness, but will not be disclosing for fear of the consequences,” says Judi Clements. “This makes the policy ironic as well as intolerant.”

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Media enquiries to:

Paula Taylor

Communications & Marketing Manager

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

021 300 594

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