

Sex offender recidivism study brings researcher top award

Research by University of Canterbury PhD student Gwenda Willis into sex offender recidivism was recognised last night at the MacDiarmid Young Scientists of the Year Awards.

Gwenda, who won the Science and our Society category award with a cash prize of \$5000, found that offenders may be more likely to re-offend if they are forced away from the community after leaving prison. Her work is the first published study to show a link between quality of planning for community reintegration and recidivism. It contributes to a growing body of knowledge based on research sponsored by the Department of Corrections, together with overseas studies, that highlights the importance of pre-release planning and offender reintegration processes. Participants in Gwenda's research had completed a prison-based treatment programme at the Kia Marama Special Treatment Unit at Rolleston Prison, near Christchurch, for men convicted of sexual offending against children.

She studied 39 men who had reoffended since their release and 42 who had not, measuring the quality of release plans for both groups. The groups were matched in terms of time since release and risk of reoffending. She measured planning for accommodation, employment, social support and setting pro-social goals related to their values.

Her findings were validated by a subsequent study of sexual offenders released from Te Piriti Special Treatment Unit at Auckland Prison.

Results showed that, overall, sex offenders with good planning had a 6 per cent reoffending rate, compared to 17 per cent for those with poor planning. Having a place to live organised when they got out of prison was shown to be particularly important.

Gwenda presented her research to an



PhD student Gwenda Willis won the Science and our Society category award in the 2008 MacDiarmid Young Scientists of the Year Awards.

international conference on the treatment of sexual abusers in the United States last year and was awarded the prize for best paper by a postgraduate student.

"A lot of research in this field has concentrated on changing the attitudes or mind-set of offenders but few people have realised the importance of the environment they are being released into," Gwenda said. "My work shows that more careful planning, which is a relatively inexpensive thing to do, can make a real difference providing communities co-

operate and help sex offenders make the transition."

Gwenda expects to complete her PhD early next year and is also training to be a clinical psychologist.

The MacDiarmid Awards are presented annually by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology, with principal sponsor Fisher and Paykel Appliances, and are named after the New Zealand-born, Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Professor Alan MacDiarmid. They celebrate the achievements of New Zealand's future leaders in science and are also designed to encourage others to follow in their footsteps.

Foundation CEO Murray Bain said the standard of entries in 2008 was outstanding with entrants carrying out innovative and world-class science in a range of areas that were important to New Zealand.

The winner of the overall prize, the 2008 MacDiarmid Young Scientist of the Year title, is Rebecca McLeod who completed a BSc at Canterbury University in 1998. A marine ecologist, her research has shown that clearing coastal forests can alter the way marine ecosystems work.

The overall runner-up in this year's awards is Matthew Brodie, who completed his Bachelor of Engineering at UC. He has won the award for developing a world-first system for measuring the movements of skiers while racing downhill.

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