

Students take therapies to the front line

» **TIM BARLASS**

IT WAS "complete desperation" that forced recovering heroin addict Sarah to come into the counselling clinic in Darlinghurst. She has an attractive ring on her engagement finger but that's because it doesn't fit on any other and the relationship is "on hold" anyway.

"I need to sort my own life out before I can be any good to anybody else," said the 32-year-old, who is on an 18-month good behaviour bond.

"I want to be part of society instead of against society - and drug free," she said.

What is different about Sarah's counselling is that, in an Australian first, a student forensic psychologist is involved in the proceedings.

A unique partnership between Corrective Services and the University of NSW launched two weeks ago involves the masters students in the assessment of offenders in the community - from recovering addicts such as Sarah to former serious sex offenders.

Luke Grant, the Assistant Commissioner of Corrective Services NSW, said it puts a big emphasis on psychologists in its hardest treatment programs with sexual and violent offenders.

"We employ 170 psychologists in total in Corrective Services, now we have got an additional 23 individuals

contributing to that activity, it is quite a significant input."

One of the first students to benefit from the new scheme is Helen Fearnley, who has just finished the academic component of the masters forensic psychology course.

She has also just completed a placement at Parklea jail in the violent offenders therapeutic program.

"I have had good training, you have to be the sort of person who is comfortable working within this population," Ms Fearnley said.

"It is certainly nice to provide a service to the community, particularly to a group of people who are ostracised from mainstream society," she said.

Ms Fearnley said she was yet to work with sex offenders but did not have any misgivings about the prospect. "To me I can separate a person from their behaviour, and everybody deserves treatment."

Anita McGregor, who heads the program, said it meant students were not being put into placements where they weren't as comfortable.

"We actually now have a process where the students can gain the kinds of experience and confidence in doing an excellent job."

Last month, Western Australia launched the nation's first public sex

offender register amid concerns that those named on it will be unfairly targeted.

The details of about 50 paedophiles are published on the Community Protection Website in WA providing the public with photos, names and suburbs, but not the exact addresses.

But there is certainly no suggestion that NSW will follow a similar course of action.

Mr Grant added: "Most of the states have adopted an approach similar to the one we have, that's a sensible approach. So far there hasn't been a compelling argument for doing it. We have the child sex offender register in NSW, there is a requirement for people to register. Someone who is a sex offender is on a register and that contains their address and details about them. That information is known by people who can take advantage of it - the police, Corrective Services and other agencies that need to know that information.

"We have an incredibly good success rate with our treatment regime for sex offenders. If the high risk sex offender does one of our intensive sex offender programmes their risk of reoffending is reduced by as much as 75 per cent."