
Book reviews

Acute Problems: A Survey of the Quality of Care in Acute Psychiatric Wards.

By Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health.

London: The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. 1998. 56 pp.

In this second, more intensive report on acute in-patient care from the Sainsbury Centre, 215 patients on nine different acute wards were studied soon after admission, during admission and after discharge. The picture that emerges is extremely disquieting, although unlikely to surprise those who work on similar wards. The authors find that there is little evidence of individualised treatment plans while on the ward, and that patients often feel unsafe and spend much time doing nothing. They note the absence of the multi-disciplinary team, and record that in-patient care is often confined to interviews with psychiatrists and care from nurses. Care from occupational therapists, social workers and psychologists is unusual, and often late in coming. Despite this, the patients improve, with symptoms on the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (Overall & Gorham, 1962) falling from an average 12.7 on admission, to only 6.4 on discharge. The authors appear bemused by this finding, saying it is "against the odds", but it should cause them no surprise: if patients are admitted at a time of acute crisis, and most of them receive chemotherapy, a reduction of this magnitude is to be expected. They state that "nearly a fifth of patients receive no medication *whatsoever*" (emphasis added); but this should not surprise them either, as on an earlier page they state that 15% had no diagnosis or that of personality disorder, while 10% were social or respite care admissions. They make no comments on the fact that many more patients receive major tranquillisers than receive diagnoses of psychotic illness, and that one-fifth of the patients in one unit had been in seclusion, while staff in five of the nine wards managed perfectly well without seclusion rooms. The authors draw 10 major conclusions from their survey, when taken together with other published work on acute care. Addressing themselves to the Department of Health and commissioners, they state that "patient-centred care should be the fundamental principle underpinning . . . acute care"; and this seems likely to be adopted by the Department of Health, and to form yet another exhortation to the providers of care. The authors do not suggest that resources

for mental health services should be improved, to allow more staff to be employed to deliver the sort of care that they advocate. After all, the present staff are not sitting on their hands: in my view there are not enough of them in many areas. Having exhaustively documented the deficiencies of the buildings in which acute care takes place, they rightly conclude that commissioners and providers should take steps to improve the hospital environment. Addressing providers, they urge that a range of therapeutic activities should be made available, and that recreational activities should be "considered as therapy", and made available throughout weekdays and at weekends. This, they assert bravely, will make in-patient care "optimally effective".

The authors describe alternatives to hospital admission as "lamps in a dark landscape", and make recommendations for implementing "a range of crisis services". It is certainly correct that much pressure could be taken off acute units if alternative facilities were available for people who do not need acute care, but it is unlikely that all the patients whose histories are given in detail could be cared for in such facilities – unless, of course, they were acute units that happened to be housed in non-institutional settings. Overall, this is a generally helpful report both for the mentally ill and for those who care for them, and it is to be hoped that useful action will flow from it.

Reference

OVERALL, J. E. & GORHAM, D. R. (1962) The Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale. *Psychological Reports*, **10**, 799–812.

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Mount Misery. By Samuel Shem.

London: Black Swann. 1999. 570 pp. £7.99 (pb), ISBN 0-552-99813-3.

Samuel Shem's novel charts the first year of an American young doctor in the fictional psychiatric hospital Mount Misery. Dr Roy Basch, the hero, chose a psychiatric career after becoming disillusioned with medicine. It is the sequel of *The House of God* (Shem, 1985), his first novel,