



vignettes of good practice and innovation. The variation between areas begs obvious questions, not least of which is why great differences in funding bear no relationship to need.

The recommendations of good practice and the process of audit are in harmony with the report of a joint working party of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and Royal College of Physicians (1998). This working party emphasised the importance of coordinated service development that took account of examples of good practice and was more accountable to the public. It called for comparison of practice against a national reference framework. We now eagerly await publication of the National Service Framework for Older People.

The *Forget Me Not* report is largely devoted to dementia care and my major criticism is the lack of data on resources committed to functional mental illness or discussion about the needs of this group. The absence of a statement demanding a more vigorous attitude to the early treatment of depression outside specialist services is a missed opportunity.

This gripe aside, the report is essential reading for anyone involved with commissioning, planning and providing these services. It is written with clarity and contains sensible advice and good ideas. Reading it resurrects any flagging passion to improve services for this vulnerable group of people. It reminded me what can and should be achieved and, in case I had forgotten, of the excitement and potential that exists in this area of work.

ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS & ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS (1998) *Care of Older People With Mental Illness: Specialist Services and Medical Training*. CR69. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists & Royal College of Physicians.

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Hospital Treatment and Care

By G. Howe. London: Kingsley Publishers. 1999. 160 pp. £11.95 (pb). ISBN: 1-85302-744-8

This book is the third volume in a series addressing different aspects of mental health care and focuses on user experiences of hospital care. Each chapter consists of a case study, followed by a group discussion with 12 service users and carers. The author is the chair of the group.

Obviously the objective of such a book is to draw attention to flaws in the

system, but this book is not a long whinge. On the contrary, it is clear that much attention has been given to present both sides of the story. Several negative narratives are balanced by the same person's positive experiences, mostly at a later time in a different setting.

It is difficult to feel a strong sense of identification and discomfort reading the stories, especially because it is all so recognisable. Mostly it concerns the lack of respect, poor communication and poor basic care. What makes it worse is that some follow-up stories show how relatively small shifts in the attitudes of professionals can make colossal differences to patients. We should question whether it is tolerable that some patients are so unhappy with care under the NHS that they are willing to mortgage their houses in order to afford private care. And can we really not provide the same quality of care consistently throughout the NHS? If anything, this book is a strong endorsement of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Commission for Health Improvement.

Of course the book has its weaknesses. The group functions as a Greek choir, often oddly neutralising the impact of the story by their commentary rather than allowing the cases to speak for themselves, too rarely adding personal experiences. The language is also distracting, members being described as survivors and sufferers, and people in the case stories as patients. The introduction and summary are good, highlighting the key issues.

In summary, a book that touched me. No one will agree with every position expressed, but it will be difficult not to agree with the overall message: too many people receive poor care in hospital.

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Offenders with personality disorder

By Royal College of Psychiatrists. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists. CR71. 1999. 95 pp. £12.50. ISBN: 1-901242-34

Until a few years ago most writing on personality disorder made for dismal reading. The reference list consisted of all the usual suspects and, however great one's respect for the man, it had to be accepted that a topic was dead when the last word on it came from Aubrey Lewis. Happily, things look different now, with a flurry of legislative activity and a growing body of research. It would be comforting

to believe that this change represented the coming of age of psychiatry. Has the profession realised at last that difficult patients do not go away just because one ignores them? Well, no. Like many comforting beliefs, this one would be untrue. Most credit should go to the government, for forcing us to confront a problem that had been ignored for too long.

This development may have unfortunate consequences, as the Government must be tempted to ignore psychiatry completely. While the impulse is understandable, this would be a serious mistake, for two reasons. First, psychiatrists had good reason to be wary of the compulsory treatment of someone's personality, and a workable solution will have to deal with many of these concerns. Second, if the 'big idea' amounts to locking up all the bad people before they commit their offences, the government needs all the advice it can get. After all, if the solution was so simple, other (democratic) countries would have adopted it already. This book shows that the solution is far from simple. It shows that progress is likely to be made over the long-term, through properly funded research and treatment programmes. There is little encouragement here for anyone who is looking for a quick and dramatic answer.

In less than 100 pages the book summarises the state of our knowledge about offending and personality disorder. The matter of fact tone tells a depressing tale of children who are the victims of poor or cruel parenting, made worse by exclusion from schools. They graduate to offending of varying degrees, before forming and breaking dysfunctional relationships that serve to complete the cycle.

Despite its origins as the work of a College committee, it is concise and readable throughout. The authors have synthesised a wide range of views to produce a consensus that is nicely balanced between, on the one hand, acknowledging our limitations and, on the other, pointing the way forward. They spell out the difficulties facing researchers and clinicians in this area, without ever being tempted to throw up their hands in horror and abandon the challenge. This book should be in your library. If you are thinking of a research project, you should have read it already. If you are involved in providing a psychiatric service, you should read it soon. If you are thinking of making laws in this area, you should read it twice.

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