

Correspondence

College Reading Lists

DEAR SIR

In welcoming the reply to Drs Birtchnell and Gordon (*Bulletin*, 1981, 5, 226) to criticisms of their General Reading List made by Drs Snaith and Baugh, it may be useful if I add a few points.

In 1974 I was asked by the Education Committee to chair a subcommittee with the task of drawing up College Reading Lists. Membership of the subcommittee has throughout included a representative from each Section and Group within the College and from the Trainees Committee, as well as the Honorary Librarian and the Editor of the *Journal*. It was this subcommittee which invited Drs Birtchnell and Gordon to draw up the General List and which agreed that inclusion of an item on a Specialist List was no barrier to its inclusion also in the General List.

The list was approved after circulation to the members and full discussion.

In attempting to make the lists reasonably representative of widely varying opinions, the help of a large number of Fellows, Members and Trainees was enlisted.

The Reading Lists Subcommittee would, I understand, welcome comments, either in public or in private, on the value of the work done. Is the publication of such book lists and reading lists desirable and useful? If so, how best should they be prepared?

JOHN BOWLBY

The Tavistock Clinic
Belsize Lane, London NW3

The College and politics in South Africa

DEAR SIR

Statements that the legislation for, and the practice of, psychiatry in South Africa are racially discriminative and politically motivated appeared in letters by Dr Sashidharan (*Bulletin*, November 1980, 171), Dr Ryle (*Bulletin*, 1981, 5, 148), the article by Dr Levine (*Bulletin*, 1981, 5, 94) and by inference in the College's 1981 Annual Report. These statements are totally untrue, and possibly for this reason the writers have not provided any evidence or references from the South African Mental Health Legislation.

The accusations involve all psychiatrists, including members of the College, who practise in the service of the Government of South Africa, and their professional character and reputation have therefore been discredited and

damaged. As these misrepresentations have not yet been corrected, I would like to comment on the references to South Africa in each communication. Before doing so, may I make some general comments.

The Mental Health Act (1973) (RSA) and the Criminal Procedures Act (1977) are available for study, while the legislation, its history, the various commissions and legal matters relating to mental disorder in South Africa, have been set out and explained by Kruger (1980).

Race, colour, apartheid and political opinions are not and never have been mentioned in the Mental Health Legislation of South Africa. It is nowhere enacted, nor implied, that under any circumstances or for any reason a person may be discriminated against in respect of psychiatric treatment, nor that psychiatry may be used, or misused, for any political purpose. These facts are perfectly explicit, and any person who represents them otherwise either has not read the Acts or has chosen to mis-state their provisions.

Dr Sashidharan has had no personal experience of South African psychiatry. He states (*Bulletin*, November 1980, 171) that 'charges of psychiatric detention for political reasons have come from sources within South Africa.' His source, an article by Miss De Villiers (1975), a reporter, in the *Johannesburg Sunday Times* does not mention the subject. He further charges that 'psychiatric facilities could be used for the political and social control of blacks'; 'non-observance of the laws of apartheid are equated with mental disorder'; 'any African who does not obey the laws of apartheid is mentally disordered'; 'the South African issue is similar to the Soviet misuse of psychiatry for political purposes.' He goes on to say that the College 'condones' this unethical behaviour because of 'its flourishing contacts with South African psychiatrists', presumably its own members. These allegations are all unsubstantiated and untrue.

Referring to a letter in the *BMJ* (Parkes and Ryan, 1978) which quotes Amnesty International, Dr Sashidharan says incorrectly that 'increasing numbers of doctors are held as political prisoners or have died in custody'. Only three doctors were named in the *BMJ*: a dentist, in 1977, hanged himself in prison, four hours after arrest (charges not stated); a doctor was arrested, questioned and later released; a doctor in 1974 was sentenced to prison for political offences. There were no psychiatric issues in any of these cases.

He calls on the College to 'speak against South African psychiatry'. Why was this unethical, misleading letter published? Dr Sidney Bloch, who as co-editor of the *Bulletin* approved of Dr Sashidharan's letter, also co-edited a new text on the subject of psychiatric ethics in which there are sections dealing with the political misuse of psychiatry and with the Soviet system. South Africa is not mentioned anywhere in this book (Bloch and Chodoff, 1981).