
Book reviews

Knowing Our Own Minds: A Survey of How People in Emotional Distress Take Control of Their Lives. By ALISON FAULKNER. London: Mental Health Foundation. 1997. 104 pp. £15.00. ISBN 0-901-94439-4

This is the first report of a survey carried out by the Mental Health Foundation during 1996. The aim of the research was to gain insight into the activities and treatments that people with a range of different mental health problems find helpful, and to learn about the different coping strategies people develop. Six hundred and fifty questionnaires were sent out to subjects who identified themselves as users of mental health services, 401 responded. They were recruited in three different ways: one group responded to adverts in local papers (45, 11%), another group came from organisations represented on the Steering Group of the project such as the Manic Depression Fellowship (217, 54%), and the third from people attending mental health projects and services (139, 35%).

There was a reasonable representation for age, gender, ethnic origin, demography and employment status. Treatments and help experienced included psychiatric medication, electroconvulsive therapy, alternative and complementary therapies, talking treatments, religious and spiritual beliefs and self-help coping strategies.

This is an interesting study but can obviously be adversely criticised in relation to the sample of subjects. It can be claimed that the sample used came to a large degree from possibly atypical groups of people (i.e. pressure groups and those that respond to adverts in newspapers). The problem is how do you recruit people for such studies? Whatever method used will have significant disadvantages.

The fact that this study has some faults with sampling should not detract from the importance of the lessons to be learned from it. What the people in the survey are saying is what most of us should know already, but knowing does not necessarily mean paying attention. Pressure of work, pressure from others and many other mechanisms influence what we do and what we fail to do. Reading this report with an open mind may help the reader to think about how they practise psychiatry and move their practice towards meeting at least some of the needs and expectations of those who seek their help.

I have not mentioned any of the findings since I think this may spoil reading a book that is easy to read, not too long and contains material of importance to all of us.

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Shell-Shock: A History of the Changing Attitudes to War Neurosis. By ANTHONY BABINGTON. London: Leo Cooper. 1997. 218 pp. £16.95 (hb). ISBN 0-85052-562-4

This book comes at an opportune time. Shell-shock is a subject familiar to readers of Pat Barker's acclaimed trilogy of novels about the First World War, and is set to reach an even wider audience with the release of the film of *Regeneration*, in which a psychiatrist (W. H. R. Rivers) figures as the unlikely hero. The First World War continues to exert its pull on our imagination: the present book has developed out of the author's interest in the justice meted out to soldiers. It makes a useful and informative addition to the literature on the history of war.

Half of the book deals with the First World War, the area in which the author clearly feels more comfortable. However, the periods before and after (from the Ancient Greeks to the Gulf War) are also covered in considerable detail. The chapter on the American Civil War, which saw a huge number of men breakdown, is particularly fascinating. The overall balance seems to be right – the First World War produced by far the greatest number of psychological casualties, it is the best documented, and it crystallised the transition from a physiological to a purely psychological explanation for war neurosis. Babington describes this process thoroughly, and even though he explicitly denies any claim to be writing a medical book, psychiatrists could find much to interest them in his discussion of the psychiatric ideas current at the time. British psychiatric practice, still rooted in the 19th century, was beginning to be invigorated by the fresh psychoanalytic winds blowing in from the Continent; Babington shows how the First World War catalysed this reaction by legitimising modified psychoanalytical ideas and methods.

The book's chronological approach mingles military, political, medical and legal topics. The author, a former circuit judge, has previously written on the soldiers who were court-martialled