

antibody to hepatitis B<sub>e</sub> antigen). Patients with Down's syndrome were 18 times more likely to be 'infectious' carriers than those without, and male patients were six times more likely to be 'infectious' carriers than female patients.

The carrier rate decreased with age, but the proportion of carriers who were hepatitis B<sub>e</sub> antigen positive were unaffected by age (Clarke *et al*, 1984).

It is therefore very important that monitoring of the hospital and community population of the mentally handicapped for hepatitis B is maintained and that vaccination of patients and staff takes place when appropriate.

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#### Nurses' Attitudes to Psychiatry in a General Hospital

SIR: Liaison psychiatry and community care appear to be having a field-day in academic psychiatric circles. But to be practically successful the ideas must percolate through to the professionals we work with: physicians, nurses and para-medical staff. Their acceptance of such ideas will be determined by the attitudes they already have towards psychiatry and psychiatrists. Hence the necessity for further clarification of these attitudes.

Thirty-five trained general nurses (SRNs) were surveyed using an attitude questionnaire (Townsend, 1978). A control group of 35 age and sex-matched nurses just beginning their training was also studied. Although the sample consisted predominantly of women, over two-thirds felt that women are no more likely to develop mental disturbances than men. Nearly nine out of ten supported the belief that adult mental disturbances can be traced to emotional experiences in childhood. Almost half genuinely thought that most suicides occur because of rejection in love. After doing an eight-week placement in psychiatry in a DGH Unit with rapid turnover and no long-stay provision, about 1 in 5 still felt that few inmates of mental hospitals ever leave hospital.

Regarding the work of the psychiatrist, two-thirds felt that we should show patients where their ideas are incorrect. After having participated repeatedly in

multi-disciplinary ward rounds, a fifth continued to feel that the main job of the psychiatrist was to recommend hobbies and other ways for patients to occupy their minds. Curiously enough, two-fifths of the control group felt that a good psychiatrist acts like a father to his patients. Four-fifths of the trained group disagreed with this.

It was clear from the responses that among these nurses, a dichotomous view concerning physical and mental illness persisted. Over four-fifths of trained nurses saw little role of physical causes in bringing about mental disorder. A similar proportion also denied the role of poor diet in any manifestations of mental instability. This viewpoint is potentially dangerous, since the possibility of the elderly deprived/mentally ill presenting the mental symptoms because of subclinical vitamin deficiency is greater in a general hospital setting.

At a social level, a third of the nurses denied mental health the status of an important national problem. About half also felt that psychiatrists almost always have difficulty in telling whether or not a patient's mental disorder was curable.

In spite of all the methodological pitfalls of a questionnaire study, one message is clear. The resistance and mistrust towards psychiatry and psychiatrists is only marginally different now from what it was in the past. The days of total community care are imminent, and yet some of our colleagues are not aware of what psychiatry has to offer. While a review of the psychiatric training of general nurses is needed, a careful re-appraisal as to our own behaviour merits study.

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#### Phensedyl Abuse

SIR: Interest in the abuse of ephedrine (Whitehouse & Duncan, *Journal*, February 1987, **150**, 258-261) and pseudoephedrine (Pugh & Howie, *Journal*, December 1986, **149**, 798) prompts me to report the occurrence of phensedyl abuse in a group of young men in a small country town (Midsomer Norton) and the treatment of an addict.

Phensedyl is a proprietary cough linctus available without prescription. Each 5 ml contains 7.2 mg of