

Foreign report

Mental health services in North-East Greece

NICK BOURAS, Consultant Psychiatrist, Guy's Hospital, London SE1 9RT

Thrace is the North-East province of Greece, bordering on Turkey. It has a population of about 300,000 including ethnic minority groups and is predominantly rural. In 1985 the Society of Social Psychiatry, an independent non-profit mental health organisation funded jointly by the Greek State, in collaboration with the Thrace University Psychiatric Department, developed a comprehensive mental health service plan, based on catchment area principles. Emphasis was given to community care and rehabilitation, a multidisciplinary approach, the integration of adult, children and learning disabilities services, and close links with community agencies. The plan was supported by state funds and special EC grants. An impressive network of services and facilities has been developed over the last seven years.

Peripatetic community mental health teams

The core service is the Mobile Psychiatric Unit, consisting of several community peripatetic teams, which visit regularly all towns and main villages of Thrace. Their composition is multi-professional including a psychiatrist, child psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, psychiatric nurse, and social worker for every 20,000 people and in addition an occupational, speech therapist and special needs teacher for every 60,000 people. The peripatetic teams provide psychiatric assessment and treatment on a regular basis as they visit the same place on a certain day of the week. Clients are usually visited in their homes, but as houses are scattered in the rural periphery, they might have to come to the nearest village. They can be seen at the local health centre or in a community office, which might be the local school or even in the village coffee shop!

Over the last six months the teams' case load was 1,300 cases, covering a wide range of problems from acute psychosis and depression to personality disorders and mental retardation. Another important function of the teams is to encourage and form links with the local community, and to raise the awareness and understanding of people about mental

illness. Local clergy, teachers and police have been important allies in this endeavour.

In-patient unit

The in-patient unit has 21 beds (16 belong to the University Clinic and 5 to the Health Service) and is located in the District General Hospital of Alexandroupolis, the main city. Patients are admitted for acute disturbance as a result of psychotic illness or being at suicidal risk in depression. The average in-patient stay is 12 days. An interesting feature of the service is that when the community teams have to admit any of their patients, they continue to manage them during the in-patient period with the co-operation of the ward staff. This flexible mode of working has a great advantage in maintaining continuity of care and avoiding unnecessary disruption for the patient.

Mental health community facilities

The community facilities include a hostel for 12 residents, supported houses or flats for 18 people and a day centre. The hostel is situated in a large house at the outskirts of the city of Alexandroupolis and houses individuals with severe chronic mental disabilities, most of whom were recently resettled from the Leros asylum as they come from that area. Each of them has an individual care plan, including daily work activities. The hostel runs its own allotment and supplies the local hotels with vegetables and fresh eggs. The supported houses offer a more independent way of life. People can either be transferred there from the hostel when they have progressed enough in their care, or be directly admitted from the in-patient unit or the community.

Training

An elaborate training programme is run by the University Department and the Society of Social Psychiatry and Mental Health for direct care staff and professionals. A two year Masters Degree in Mental Health was set up recently, the only one



Community Hostel in Alexandroupolis

available in Greece to train people in current approaches to mental health care, and is attended by about 100 trainees.

Comments

The mental health system in this part of rural Greece provides a fascinating model of social and community psychiatry. This area was lacking any psychiatric services until recently, with available options being either some sort of private care, or in-patient treatment, quite likely resulting in long stay admission in a hospital miles away in the city of Thessaloniki. With the establishment of

the Democriton University Medical School and financial help from the EC, Thrace now enjoys an advanced, quality service system based on the current philosophy of community care, and is indisputably cost-effective. The monitoring of the service has provided convincing evidence, although the state bureaucrats have yet to be convinced, that the cost per individual case in the community residential facilities is less than 50% of the cost in a long stay mental hospital. This is of particular importance for a Mediterranean country without strategic planning for mental health, as this depends on the political ideology of the party in power. There is an admirable enthusiasm and commitment from all members of staff, led by Professor P. Sakellaropoulos, a French trained psychoanalyst-psychiatrist with a dedication to community care. He and his colleagues are proud to have contributed to the "reforms" of mental health care in Greece. They are, however, fully aware of the difficulties experienced at present by long established health care systems in the West. Their concern is that mental health care may already be in an "anti-reform" trend, which will certainly have an effect on them. A point to be taken into consideration is that any innovations in psychiatry, unless they are supported by vigorous research, become vulnerable. Some recent examples are the therapeutic community and the Italian psychiatric reforms. Research has become necessary even for the politics of survival!

Appeal from the former Yugoslavia

Professor Dusan Kecmanovic, Professor of Psychiatry, University of Sarajevo, has had to flee Sarajevo and is seeking a job in a psychiatric hospital in London. It would be appreciated if anyone who is able to help him would contact him at 11000 Beograd, Ohrdiska 2A, Yugoslavia.