
Book review

Getting into the System: Living with Serious Mental Illness. BY GWEN HOWE. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998. 144 pp. £11.95 (pb). ISBN 1-85302-457-0

It is encouraging that this helpful book endorses what most psychiatrists would regard as good clinical practice, based as it is on the views of patients and carers. As the title implies, it is made up largely of accounts of individuals' experiences of getting into and remaining within the care system. The causes of failure described will unfortunately be only too familiar to psychiatrists, including logistical problems and professional lapses, and more fundamentally, lingering ideologies that reject diagnosis and disparage medication.

The emphasis on sharing information with patients and carers is newer to psychiatrists, and is presented in a very strong form with the assertion of a civil right for patients to be told the diagnosis at an early stage. There is an interesting argument, that for others to know the diagnosis while the patient is kept in the dark intensifies rather than avoids the feeling of being 'labelled'. However, difficult questions are

begged, including the need for changes in the attitudes of society and the media if patients are to be comfortable with the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Growth in the use of the term among my patients seems to have been reversed as these attitudes have worsened in recent years. This is where the analogy which is drawn with diabetes breaks down, useful though it is in other respects.

Moreover, the LEAP group from which these views were derived in fact comprised six carers and only five patients, some of whom had affective illnesses, not schizophrenia. The views of a much larger group, from regular meetings and a specific discussion of this book, tended towards a more cautious attitude to people being told this diagnosis, with stress on individual preferences and circumstances and on the stage of the illness. However, I would still recommend this book, as well as the others in the series, to all those involved in mental illness services.

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