Discovering the true value of partnership with the voluntary sector

Tait & Shah (2007) hail the benefits of partnership in the community with the voluntary sector, and outline challenges for the future. They acknowledge that most psychiatrists already have practical experience of working with charities providing mental healthcare, but overlook the wider context, hinted at only by reference to Aldridge’s (2005) publication for the Social Market Foundation.

The voluntary sector has been an innovator in the provision of care environments throughout the journey of psychiatry from alienism to social inclusion, driven by strong founding values. For example, the Retreat at York, St Andrew’s Healthcare in Northampton and Together (formerly the Mental After Care Association) are legacies of 18th- and 19th-century philanthropy and social reform. These charities are now working with Mind, Rethink, Turning Point, the Richmond Fellowship, Carr Gomm and others under the umbrella of the voluntary sector Mental Health Providers Forum (http://mhpf.org.uk/members.asp) to improve provision for service users.

It is important to understand the current government’s strategic intent for partnership working in mental health – to create better value through inclusion of not-for-profit providers. Shah & Tait note that competition between the voluntary and statutory sectors can be a bar to partnership, and suggest that some mental health professionals see voluntary sector community staff as ‘amateurs’. However, government agencies have pressed competitive re-tendering and cost improvements on these charities, while the national initiatives listed by Shah & Tait fail to deliver on the principle of full cost recovery, leaving providers struggling to meet their costs through fundraising.

In an ideal world the government would have a longer-term view, and see how best to enable the ‘value chain’ between the public and voluntary sectors, to use a modern market term that covers cooperative relationships between companies. This would require a higher resourcing level, just as the government has provided to kick-start private sector healthcare initiatives such as the private finance initiative (PFI) and independent sector treatment centres (ISTCs). This would accelerate the development of the partnerships envisaged by Tait & Shah, bringing in the long-term better, innovative and more efficient services. Nevertheless it is clear that the voluntary sector has a growing role in the future of psychiatric care.

Declaration of interest

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