

Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN and ALAN LEE

Ethics in Psychiatric Research: A Resource Manual for Human Subjects Protection

Edited by Harold Pincus, Jeffrey Lieberman & Sandy Ferris. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association. 1999. 341 pp. US\$75.00 (hb). ISBN 0-89042-281-8

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) is to be commended on producing this volume which is, as the title suggests, a manual for researchers in psychiatry. The APA's Committee on Research on Psychiatric Treatments took the wise step of focusing on the ethical dimension of psychiatric research after consulting with the research community and lay advocacy organisations. The National Institute of Mental Health has also played a major role in the manual's development.

The book is very much a practical resource although it does not assume a regulatory function. Rather, it reflects the considered judgments of the contributors. They comprise a distinguished group. The 10 chapters are, therefore, of a uniformly high standard.

After a helpful historical context, the chapters that follow deal with various facets of the research enterprise or different types of research. We are invited to consider crucial subjects such as informed consent, surrogate decision-making and advance directives, the particular difficulties of conducting medication-free research and that requiring invasive procedures, special pressures that arise in conducting research in children and adolescents, the role of the family when one of its members is a research subject, and the tricky theme of ensuring appropriate clinical care during the application of a research protocol. These are all salient topics for researchers in psychiatry and merit careful perusal.

Again, typical of a manual, the authors have introduced a range of appendices to complement their own views. This documentation is particularly illuminating and

serves well to alert the psychiatric researcher to potential ethical snags and pitfalls.

Indeed, it is useful to have such documents as the Declaration of Helsinki, the Nuremberg statement and the National Institutes of Health's policy on consent in research involving impaired subjects. With one or two exceptions, the appendices are USA-based, as indeed is the book as a whole. While many of the topics discussed have universal relevance, the fact is that the manual has been prepared by American researchers to meet their needs rather than those of an international audience. Notwithstanding, much can be gleaned from the volume that is of interest and relevance to psychiatric researchers wherever they work. In the absence of any competing texts, this manual is the most comprehensive and informative so far published. We may entertain the hope that other psychiatric bodies in other countries will be spurred to prepare similar volumes to take local conditions into account. This is already happening with, for instance, a comparable manual soon to appear in Australia under the aegis of the National Health and Medical Research Council. The Australian volume has been designed for researchers in biomedicine generally, although it will contain material pertinent to research in psychiatry.

Given the horrors of the Nazi medical crimes and the Nuremberg statement that followed in 1946, it has taken an enormously long time for the research community to acknowledge and examine systematically the ethical parameters of conducting research on human subjects. In a psychiatric context, this manual is in one sense the culmination of a range of developments over half a century. Its arrival is, therefore, to be celebrated.

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Antisocial Personality Disorder. An Epidemiological Perspective

By Paul Moran. London: Gaskell. 1999. 125 pp. £12.50 (pb). ISBN 1-901242-24-2

Choose the odd one out: Philippe Pinel, the DSM-IV, Hannibal Lector, and the Home Secretary, Jack Straw. It's Hannibal Lector – the other three have all attempted to define a mental condition manifested by antisocial behaviour. Pinel based his attempt on careful observation, DSM-IV did it by committee and Jack Straw responded to media images. All three would have done better if they had been able to read Paul Moran's carefully constructed review of the prevalence, causes, risk factors and social burden of this ancient disorder, currently enjoying a rediscovery.

The author's conclusions, supported by balanced appraisal of the literature, demonstrate the huge gaps in our knowledge of antisocial personality disorder. We have various prevalence figures but know little of its incidence. Good long-term studies on the natural history of the disorder are still awaited. These need to be based on psychosocial outcome measures and not simply conviction data. We know something of risk factors but little of protective factors. We are not yet in a position to suggest preventive strategies with great confidence. In all these fields, the diagnostic criteria of antisocial personality disorder remain as elusive today as they were to Pinel two centuries ago. Moran's argument for a combined dimensional and categorical approach to personality disorder is compelling. Until we have a clearer understanding of the measurable personality characteristics that render a person dissocial (as distinct from his or her behaviour) we will continue, like our politicians, to make statements based on belief rather than science.

The author was commissioned to conduct this review by a government agency to help underpin a new research programme. Ministers need to look at Moran's findings before they leap into legislation on severe personality disorder. Sadly, we know that tabloid headlines, and not reviews of current research findings, are likely to inform government thinking on this matter.

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