

Stimulating Research

By DAVID SHAW and GARETH JONES, Department of Psychological Medicine,
Welsh National School of Medicine

At the Quarterly Meeting of the College in November 1980, a session was devoted to the subject of research in psychiatry and its inadequacies. The papers are published in full on pages 38 to 50; the following is a summary of the sessions, with some personal comments.

A number of reasons were given for the inadequacies under discussion: the heavy teaching and clinical loads of academic departments of psychiatry, the complexities of mental illness and the difficulties inherent in studying them. Speakers also raised the question whether perhaps those who selected themselves for a career in psychiatry in some way regarded research as inimical to their primary interest in people; and whether the feeling others had of a mystique attached to research might be dispelled.

PROFESSOR SIR DOUGLAS BLACK pointed out that it was not essential for every clinician to be involved in research, and some were not suited to do so; on the other hand, those who did benefited by the ability of research to counteract the attitudes born of years of didactic teaching.

DR KATHERINE LEVY, representing the MRC, explained the Council's favourable attitude towards clinical research in psychiatry, and her paper (page 43) should be studied by all who may be likely to seek the Council's aid for clinical research projects.

DR PETER WILLIAMS spoke for the Wellcome Trust and described its rather novel approach in promoting psychiatric research by advertising; the success of this exercise suggested that perhaps an entrepreneurial attitude was needed as a means of recharging a slowly moving area of research. Dr Williams's paper appears on page 39.

PROFESSOR RAWNSLEY's paper should also be read in full (page 49). He dealt with the question whether the 'spectre of the MRCPsych' had inhibited research endeavour, and answered this in the negative. He also discussed the effect of economic circumstances on academic departments and the probable need to experiment with ways of promoting activity in research in our present registrar trainees.

Papers were also read by PROFESSOR A. C. P. SIMS (page 45) and DR GEORGE SZMUKLER (page 47).

Some comments

No particular originality is claimed for the following per-

sonal suggestions, nor do we claim that we have got beyond the beginnings of our efforts in this direction.

Accepting that many trainees will not look at research again, while others can be fixed to undertake it as a lifetime's hobby, the underlying assumption made on the ward is that all trainees passing through must do some research. This could be participation in medium or long-term projects (the least satisfactory), or undertaking given short projects (better, but not altogether satisfactory), or launching their own projects (the ideal).

To try to foster the latter there are fortnightly academic meetings, usually based on a problem posed by an individual patient. The set topic is presented to one individual who identifies 8 to 12 key papers, provides photostats of these, and distributes them so that there is one person to digest, analyse and criticize each publication.

On favourable occasions the material can be taken to a final point where it is possible to say it is near to the limit of our knowledge. It is possible then to point this out and ask in what areas is there ignorance, and what are the most pressing gaps in our knowledge. On the basis of our present information, how many hypotheses can be made, and of these which is the best? Is testing of the best one a practical proposition, and if so, can it be done, in part or in full, on a short or medium term basis, (i.e. is it within the time limitations of registrars in a rotation scheme?).

Could one individual combine with one or two others to plan a project which might be completed in 6 months or in 9 to 12 months? Would it be possible to carry on this study on another firm if the time scale is beyond that of the registrar's stay on the firm?

If the topic raises interest, the necessary literature searches can be started from the 'skeleton' list of reprints, and the registrar(s) can be helped to design a project, write a protocol, consider statistical ethical and other aspects, and finally get started. From small beginnings the attempt is to find out if the process of actively taking an academic meeting on to the 'frontiers' and posing questions there, will expose the registrars to the narrow limits of knowledge, the uncertainties of 'established' data, and on to the point of asking relevant questions and making testable hypotheses. This may lead them to produce propositions and, we may hope, to the full experience of the 'research process'.