
Book reviews

Survey of English Mental Hospitals. March 1993. Prepared for the Mental Health Task Force by Mike Davidge, Sue Elias, Bob Jayes, Kate Wood and John Yates. 1993. Pp 40. £5.00 including postage. Cheques to be made payable to the University of Birmingham. Available from Inter-Authority Comparisons and Consultancy, Health Services Management Centre, 40 Edgbaston Park Road, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2RT

This important report questions assumptions about the evolution of mental illness residential services, especially over the past decade, and draws attention to problematical future plans.

Evidence is presented that hospital closures have occurred only recently, despite reductions in mental hospital beds throughout the more than three decades since Enoch Powell's famous 'water tower' speech. Few of the 130 water tower hospitals which existed in 1961 closed prior to 1985; from 1986 to the present there have been 31 closures but in the earlier years these were often mergers of adjacent hospitals.

Despite the closures, the total number of beds for mentally ill and elderly mentally infirm patients in England has remained almost static from 1982 to 1992, at around 80,000. Whereas from 1890 to probably as late as the early 1980s more than 95% of beds were in large mental hospitals, only 58% of the NHS hospital provision and a smaller proportion of the total provision is now so situated. The number of hospitals and homes of various kinds, including local authority, voluntary and in particular 'private' i.e. commercial, has grown from around 1000 to almost 2500 over the same period. The commercial sector for mental illness has grown the most: from 764 residents in 53 homes in 1982-83 to 5507 in 417 homes by 1991-2, with an even greater increase in its hospitals.

These findings have obvious implications. Despite the growth in other provision almost three quarters of the places are still in hospitals, although mainly smaller ones. Providing community accommodation that does justice to the remaining hospital patients' potential is a formidable task, especially as it is mainly the more disabled who have stayed there, and would be expected to require a reflective, coordinated and long-term strategy. However, the report tabulates some 60 closures of whole hospitals or their main buildings which are planned to take place before the end of the century. Closures are now decided

by local purchasers, at a distance from the patients concerned and from their current and future providers, driven predominantly by short-term financial and other tactical concerns in a competitive market. That the majority of long-stay patients already moved out have so far coped remarkably well with the transition is mainly a tribute to themselves and should not be a source of complacency about the services provided. There are lessons from the first wave of closures and what has happened since which need to be thought through and applied carefully.

It will be a great pity if community care is brought into disrepute instead of an adequate policy being implemented. This report is an important step in providing the information on which this could be based, and is encouragingly the first stage of a larger study. It contains a great deal of useful detail and computer disks are also available which provide data on individual hospitals.

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Learning Disabilities: the fundamental facts. London: The Mental Health Foundation. 1993. Pp 48. £4.50

As is stated at the start of this report, people with severe learning disabilities are among the most vulnerable in our society. A clear, well presented statement as contained in this booklet from the Mental Health Foundation is much to be welcomed. It covers most of the issues concerning the provision of appropriate services across the age range and includes those from education, social services and health.

This booklet is not a blind advocate of community care or of any of the prevalent fashionable bandwagons. It remains open-minded about recent legislation, saying for example, "We have yet to see how successful these policy innovations will be".

Much of the booklet is taken up with a series of questions with the answers illustrated by a pie chart or by other simple graphics. These highlight that despite the high incidence of mental and physical disability in the population very many cases are never brought to the attention of the medical profession.