

A MOTTO FOR THE COLLEGE

It is intended to make application to the College of Arms for a fresh Grant enabling the Royal College of Psychiatrists to continue to use the Arms of the former Royal Medico-Psychological Association. The motto 'Let Wisdom Guide' did not form part of the original Grant, and Council will consider whether to adopt a new one, more clearly relevant to Psychiatry. Suggestions for such a motto are invited, and should be sent to the Acting Registrar of the Royal College of Psychiatrists at Chandos House.

Correspondence

Letters for publication in the Correspondence columns should be addressed to:

The Editor-in-Chief, British Journal of Psychiatry, Chandos House, 2 Queen Anne Street, London, W1M 9LE.

POLITICAL DISSENTERS IN MENTAL HOSPITALS

DEAR SIR,

In recent years there have been a number of reports in the press of the detention of political dissenters in mental hospitals in the U.S.S.R. No one would wish to believe an allegation of this kind without good evidence, and at first it appeared that the reports might be merely anti-Soviet propaganda. In cases such as that of Natalya Gorbanevskaya, who was confined to a mental hospital after protesting in the Red Square against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, it is known that she had had a minor psychiatric illness some years before, and although her friends insist that she is mentally sound there might be an element of doubt. But there are other cases, such as that of the biologist Medvedev, which cannot easily be dismissed. Medvedev is one of the scientists who took a stand against the forced acceptance of the erroneous genetic teachings of Lysenko; and it was admitted by Alexander Livshits, the Senior Medical Officer at the Kaluga mental hospital, that Medvedev's detention there was on the orders of the Ministry and mainly because of his circulating two booklets 'The cult of personality and biological science' (1962) and 'International co-operation between scientists and national frontiers' (1968). He was released only after the intervention of friends and colleagues, including the Nobel laureate Solzhenitsyn, who wrote in an open letter: 'It is time to think clearly. The incarceration of free-thinking healthy people in mental asylums is spiritual murder. It is a variation

of the gas chamber, but even more cruel—the torture of the people being killed is more malicious and more prolonged.'

Equally outspoken was the young writer Bukovsky, who was confined in the Serbsky Institute for Forensic Psychiatry after organizing a public protest against the trial of the writers Sinyavsky and Daniel. His attitude is expressed in the following appeal which he has sent to Western psychiatrists:

'In recent years in our country a number of court orders have been made involving the placing in psychiatric hospitals ('of special type' and otherwise) of people who in the opinion of their relatives and close friends are mentally healthy. These people are: Grigorenko, Rips, Gorbanevskaya, Novodvorskaya, Yakhimovich, Gershuni, Fainberg, Victor Kuznetsov, Iofe, V. Borisov and others—people well known for their initiative in defence of civil rights in the U.S.S.R.

This phenomenon arouses justified anxiety, especially in view of the widely publicized placing of the biologist Zhores Medvedev in a psychiatric hospital by extra-judicial means.

The diagnoses of the psychiatrists who have served as expert witnesses in court, and on whose diagnoses the court orders are based, provoke many doubts as regards their content. However, only specialists in psychiatry can express authoritative opinions about the degree of legitimacy of these diagnoses.

Taking advantage of the fact that I have managed to obtain exact copies of the diagnostic reports made by the forensic-psychiatric groups who examined Grigorenko, Fainberg, Gorbanevskaya, Borisov and Yakhimovich, and also extracts from the diagnosis on V. Kuznetsov, I am sending you these documents, and also various

letters and other material which reveal the character of these people. I will be very grateful to you if you can study this material and express your opinion on it.

I realize that at a distance and without the essential clinical information it is very difficult to determine the mental condition of a person and either to diagnose an illness or assert the absence of any illness. Therefore I ask you to express your opinion on only this point: do the above-mentioned diagnoses contain enough scientifically-based evidence not only to indicate the mental illnesses described in the diagnoses, but also to indicate the necessity of isolating these people completely from society?

I will be very happy if you can interest your colleagues in this matter and if you consider it possible to place it on the agenda for discussion at the next International Congress of Psychiatrists.

For a healthy person there is no fate more terrible than indefinite internment in a mental hospital. I believe that you will not remain indifferent to this problem and will devote a portion of your time to it—just as physicists find time to combat the use of the achievements of their science in ways harmful to mankind.

Thanking you in advance,

V. Bukovsky.'

Through the efforts of an informal working group on the internment of dissenters in mental hospitals, most of the documents Bukovsky mentions have now been translated into English and are available for psychiatrists who wish to study them from the Hon. Secretary of the group, Mrs. E. C. Aitken, 63 Holbrook Road, Cambridge. This material should also be helpful if, as is hoped, the matter is raised for discussion at the forthcoming International Congress in Mexico.

It could be argued that this is a domestic matter that concerns only the Russians themselves and that people in other countries should not interfere. It is true that the immediate evidence comes mainly from the U.S.S.R., but there have been reports of similar happenings in other countries, and the situation raises wider issues of considerable interest in relation to the rights of the individual when they are in conflict with what are deemed to be the interests of society. Whatever view is taken, the current reports are clearly damaging, not only to good relations between the U.S.S.R. and the West, but also to psychiatry itself in view of the implication that there are psychiatrists who are willing to prostitute themselves in the interests of political expediency.

While the reports should not be accepted uncritically, yet the allegations are there and they cannot be merely brushed aside. The only answer would appear to be a thorough and impartial investigation. In many cases the Russian psychiatrists were not unanimous in agreeing with the decisions

that were made and there is reason to believe that many would welcome an investigation of this kind.

DEREK RICHTER.

*MRC Neuropsychiatry Unit,
MRC Laboratories,
Woodmansterne Road,
Carshalton,
Surrey.*

THE N.A.M.H. 'GUIDELINES'

DEAR SIR,

The need for this Guide arises in the situation where the decision to accept or refuse admission lies with *medical* staff while the problems of violent behaviour have to be dealt with by *nursing* staff. In general the Guidelines suggest that critical *decisions* are the responsibility of nurses rather than doctors. For instance, in paragraph 2 drugs or ECT are spoken of as if it were nurses rather than doctors who decide whether they should be prescribed. My experience would confirm that this is what often happens in practice, however reluctant we as doctors may be to admit it.

I would therefore recommend a reconsideration of paragraph 7, with a view to establishing much more clearly than at present the advisability of bringing nursing officers into the decision-making process as to whether a particular patient should be admitted. It is not sufficient for doctors merely to 'discuss' the question of admission with the nursing services. We should aim for it to become established practice for a nurse to see the patient before admission to a particular institution at a particular time is decided; and in my view it should be the nursing service which should have the power to veto an admission recommended by a doctor. The Guidelines do not face up to the present situation where it is doctors who can overcrowd institutions by too generous an admission policy; while it is nurses who get the blame for subsequent neglect of their duty for patient care.

The implicit problem of authority as exercised by doctors on the one hand and nurses on the other will not be an easy one to resolve.

I suggest that the medical man in a psychiatric hospital has two sources of authority: one is purely clinical—the needs of the individual patient in question. This stems directly from medical training. The other source of authority stems from his position of responsibility in an institution devoted to the care of sick people. This kind of authority assumes that he has management functions which in many respects are those properly exercised by nurses. Thus, as a consultant, I may on the one hand judge that a disturbed patient requires in-patient care; but on