

**S13** *Images and attitudes towards psychiatry and mental illness*  
**SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG THE PUBLIC**

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Results of representative surveys conducted in Germany in the early 90s revealed marked discrepancies between the lay beliefs about mental disorders and expert knowledge. The lay public attached greatest importance to psychosocial stress for the aetiology of schizophrenia and major depression. Less frequently, biological factors have been endorsed as causes of these disorders. While psychotherapy was generally held in high esteem, psychopharmacotherapy was rejected by the vast majority of respondents. The public's image of psychotherapy appeared largely determined by popular views of psychoanalysis, whereas that of psychotropic drugs was strongly influenced by the characteristics associated with tranquillisers. Among the different psychotherapeutic approaches, psychoanalysis was, except for group therapy in the Eastern part of the country, the most preferred method. There are, however, some indications of changes of the social representations of mental disorders, due to the popularisation of new research findings in the neurosciences and most recent developments in psychopharmacotherapy.

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**PREPARING SOCIETY TO REINTEGRATE THE MENTALLY ILL: EDUCATING THE PUBLIC**

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Discharging long-stay patients into the community is no guarantee that they will become integrated socially. Barriers to integration include negative images of the mentally ill in the media which have intensified public fear of the mentally ill. Previous attempts to modify public attitudes with large scale campaigns have had disappointing results. Our objective was to evaluate an educational campaign about mental illness focussed on the neighbours of a sheltered house. We conducted a randomised controlled trial of an educational campaign. A survey of public attitudes was conducted in two streets, each of which contained a sheltered home for ex-long-stay patients. In the experimental street an educational campaign was mounted, comprising a public meeting, distribution of informational leaflets and a custom-made video and social events in the home. The survey was repeated in both streets after one year. In the experimental street there was a significant decrease in neighbours' fear of the mentally ill and wish to exclude them. More neighbours in the experimental street (28%) than in the control street (8%) visited the patients and more experimental patients (5/8) than control patients (0/6) reported contact with neighbours. A campaign focussed on neighbours can increase social integration of long-stay patients into the community.

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**Population attitudes towards deviant behaviors in everyday life, proposed interventions**

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Recent studies show that confronted to psychiatric disorders defined according to the DSM-IV categories (vignettes or brief description of pathological traits), the general population hardly perceives differences and is rather unspecific in the forms of treatment that should be undertaken.

In a survey done in Geneva in 1996 deviant situations which can appear in everyday life (social withdrawal, agitation, strangeness, violence) were described. People were asked to choose from a list of interventions the three they considered as most appropriate. Their choices strongly varied according to the situations. It appears that people would suggest in a great number of cases to turn to psychiatrists, general practitioners or someone they trust.

The study of groups having chosen very contrasted interventions show that their choices are related to more general dispositions and social representations concerning etiological factors, attitudes towards the mentally ill and towards medication. They are also embedded in different experiences and social situations. These observations put into perspective the problem of information on psychiatric disorders connected to different types of population

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**GROUP THERAPY AND ATTITUDINAL CHANGES TO MENTAL ILLNESS IN MEDICAL STUDENTS**

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In this article we present findings related to changes of attitude towards mental illness of second year medical students after group sessions. The students were assigned to two kinds of groups. Experimental groups where dynamic sensitization techniques of group psychotherapy were applied and theoretical formative groups where psychiatric cases were discussed. The OMI-R adaptation of Cohen and Struening's questionnaire OMI (Opinions towards mental illness) has been used to measure such attitudes both before and after participation in those groups. Authoritarian, one of the five dimensions of the OMI-R test, was the dimension which was most substantially altered, experiencing an overall increase.