

New Directions in Mental Health Care Evaluation

Report of a workshop* held on 3 July 1987 at the Institute of Psychiatry to discuss a proposed new unit and consortium

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Overview

Mental health care evaluation is a priority area as mental health care services are changing rapidly, more than are most other medical services. Budgets are finite, and there is concern for value for money in meeting the needs of patients and families. A one-day workshop brought together leading figures in the USA and Europe to discuss how a unit and consortium might be established to give cohesion and catalyse evaluative research in this fragmented field in the UK. Sound scientific data are available which have not yet been widely disseminated or used in policy making. There are rich opportunities for cross-national projects. The USA has intriguing innovations in evaluative research in mental health, some on a large scale, and these are relevant to the UK.

The health care evaluation unit (HCEU) would consist of full-time staff doing research, teaching and consultation.

The HCEU would link with interested parties funded from outside the unit to co-ordinate an HCE network (consortium) whose components would co-operate according to research needs. The unit and consortium would be interdisciplinary and liaise with professional, planning, administrative and government bodies and the media, keeping them informed of developments and learning what the current concerns are that deserve research.

Early concerns could include the evaluation of DHSS-funded research in community care, the evolution of quick but reliable indicators of clinical and economic outcome for quality assurance in routine clinics, the computerisation of those indicators and of non-clinical health care data to be made available nationally for researchers, and the establishment of an academic course in mental HCE. The unit and consortium could do research and development for agencies on a fee-paying basis and market evaluative methods to interested parties. It would have to address scientific peers, patients and their families, care-givers, policymakers and fund-givers. There is a large research agenda of relevance to them all, and careful focus will be essential.

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Review

Living with Schizophrenia: An educational package designed by Jackie Ferris and Roma Byer; published by Northern Schizophrenia Fellowship and distributed by Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic Products, 1986. Price not quoted.

This "educational package" contains four audio-cassettes, each lasting approximately 30 minutes, and a booklet of 11 unnumbered pages. The tapes take the form of long narratives by a small number of patients and an even smaller number of relatives, interspersed with comments by, one presumes, a psychiatrist (Dr Farquharson receives a credit on the booklet). The quality of the recording is generally good though there is sometimes some unnecessary background noise and variable recording levels. The package is well-produced although it is irritating that costs have not been saved by recording on both sides of the cassettes. The booklet is also glossily produced and looks as if it would last well. Most of it is a description of the various

methods for using the tapes for education or "counselling", particularly for "intensive counselling" which may be directed to parents, brothers or sisters, or older children.

My initial reaction to the first tape was very favourable. The various people on the tapes present fairly varied life experiences, but are all articulate and describe the florid symptoms of schizophrenia, and their reactions to them, well. It would serve as a useful educational tape for medical students. The booklet summarises the florid symptoms described in a useful way, and mentions symptoms that have been omitted.

Unfortunately my positive response ebbed away as the tapes progressed. The fact that the commentator is never introduced, that he appears on the tape with no very definite separation from the other speakers, and that his contributions are obviously edited in from a much longer and, at times rambling, commentary becomes increasingly irritating. An over-emphasis on florid symptoms becomes