

The Printed Word

Newsclippings on Mental Health

Neglected Mental Health

IT is highly distressing to note that mental health is not receiving the priority it deserves from the government. An estimated 14 million people in this country suffer from severe mental illnesses. Besides, nearly 40 million people who include an increasing number of drug addicts and alcoholics, require mental care... (according to Dr. G.N.Reddy) a disproportionate amount has always been granted to technology at the cost of human health. It pains one to note that health, education and social welfare have taken the backseat... (according to Mohsina Kidwai) only 10 per cent of mental patients were being cared for at present as there were only 1,000 qualified psychiatrists, either working in hospitals or practising on their own in the country... and for every 32,000 people there was only one psychiatric bed (*Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 20 August 1985).

No Hope for the Insane

The Lumbini Park mental hospital (Calcutta), set up in 1940... (has) no treatment facilities at the hospital, no surgical equipments... not even an X-ray machine. Though there are six visiting physicians only one psychoanalyst works part-time at the clinic, while three resident physicians, two of them superannuated, hold the fort in their absence. This is hardly sufficient for the 160 inmates, 125 male and 35 female. The patients are kept in sub-human conditions and provided whatever meagre meal is available at a government subsidy of Rs.4 a day... Even drugs, requisitioned from the Central Medicine Store, it is alleged, are insufficient, if available (*Statesman*, Calcutta, 21 April 1985).

Clinical Depression

Depression, a modern term for melancholia, is a common mood (affective) disorder with a long ancestry. The others in this group of disorders are mania and anxiety neurosis... Nearly 100 million people in the world suffer from depression each year... A study from Chandigarh indicates that nearly 20 per cent of patients seen in general medical practice suffer from depressive symptoms with or without any physical illness... In a

mental health survey carried out recently near Madurai, depressive illness was found to affect 60 persons per 100 among those aged 60 and above... The drugs which are used to treat high blood pressure, and psychotropic agents which are used for mental illness like tranquilisers, barbiturates, and hormonal preparations such as ACTH cortisone and contraceptive pills tend to induce 'iatrogenic' depression. There has been an increasing use of these depressogenic drugs over the years. The fast disappearance of the protective influences of the family and social support, a sense of 'anomie', a dessication of values, a mode of living bereft of ethics, and a state of 'existential despair', have contributed to augment the numbers depressed... Depression, a recurring illness, affects personal health, bringing psychological misery, precipitates domestic unhappiness, entails a loss of man-hours, and is a significant cause of mortality through self destruction (suicide) (*Science Today*, November 1984).

Ranchi Asylum Deaths: PUCL Report Indicts Government

A non-government inquiry conducted by the Bihar unit of PUCL has indicted the State Government for inhuman conditions in the Ranchi Mansik Arogyashala. Several hundred patients had escaped from this asylum last month... The Committee found that requests by the hospital managing committee to the state government to increase its annual outlay from Rs. 87 lakhs to over Rs. 2 crores went unheeded. The government allowed doctors' posts to lie vacant for years, sanctioning only 14 posts for nearly 1300 patients. Moreover, just one post of lady doctor existed for over 400 female patients. The Committee found no trace of nursing staff, nearly 80 of whom are supposedly employed. There was no staff room in any of the wards... The report said the mortality rate at the asylum has risen alarmingly from seven per cent in 1979 to 20 per cent in the first eight months of this year. In other asylums in the country the mortality rate is one per cent. The report attributes the high death rate to government "indifference". The asylum's medical records indicated that a majority had died of prolonged malnutri-

tion. Deaths were also caused by diarrhoea and dehydration. The Committee felt concerned that 58 patients had died over a span of 37 days... (*The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 21 October 1984).

Corruption in Mental Hospital

Relatives of the mentally ill accuse hospital staff (of Agra Mental Hospital) of corruption and callousness and of trying to fleece penurious patients. The staff they say refuse to admit those who do not have clout or cannot pay. The relatives, along with their mentally ill wards, have been forced to hire cots and live on the pavement. They struggle to cope with a situation which looks more hopeless with every passing day, aggravated by rapidly diminishing funds. Apart from paying for the cots, they have to buy food from the numerous shanty stalls that have sprung up to cater to the unexpected refugees. According to Dr. B. S. Yadav, senior medical superintendent of the hospital, patients coming from wealthy families are admitted to the paying ward which charges about Rs. 200 per month. For poor patients, provision of food, medicine and treatment is free at the general ward... Hospital sources allege that free medicines meant for poor patients are being sold... A visit inside the hospital has its own tale to tell—bare bodied patients in tattered khaki shorts cower in fright as guards force them to pull weed or cut grass in the fields (*Indian Express*, Bombay, 13 October 1984).

Mental Institute only in Name

The Institute of Mental Health, housed in the Alipore special jail, is still virtually a jail even though the state government declared it to be a mental institute for lunatic prisoners a year and a half ago. In fact, the government renovated the special jail and converted it into a mental institute for accommodating non-criminal lunatics (NCL) of the Dum Dum Central Jail with a promise to give them a fair deal... Investigations have revealed that only about 200 NCLs were taken to the institute from the Dum Dum Central Jail, out of a total of 800 NCLs languishing there (*Business Standard*, 1 October 1984).

Compiled by r.d. from the files of Centre for Education and Documentation, Bombay.