



Responsibility

Psychiatrists at times have difficulties in sharing responsibility with colleagues who are not medically qualified. As nurses, clinical psychologists and social workers acquire greater autonomy in their separate professions, the multidisciplinary team may degenerate into a tiny battlefield if its function and correct working are not properly understood.

Multidisciplinary team

It is often helpful to note the exact meaning of words. *'Multi'* means many and the word *'team'* derives from 'a set of draught animals harnessed to draw together'. *'Discipline'* means 'the order maintained and observed among persons under control or command' or, alternatively, 'the training of scholars and subordinates to proper conduct and action by instructing and exercising them in the same'. (Discipline is the proper ordering of subordinates.)

Some people labour under the misapprehension that a multidisciplinary team should be a small bletcher-group meeting regularly but incapable of deciding anything. Others believe it is the ultimate democratic weapon, and that all matters should be decided on the basis of one person one vote. They have forgotten the concepts: 'harnessed to draw together', 'order', 'under control or command', 'proper conduct and action (by instructing subordinates and exercising them in the same)'.

Psychiatrists practise multidisciplinary teamwork all their working lives even if they do not recognize it. It is only recently that the term has been used (and more often misused). The purpose of a 'multidisciplinary team' should not be a means whereby all concerned evade responsibility.

Responsibility

The concept of *'responsibility'* is essential when considering the actions of members of such a team. 'Responsibility' is 'a charge, trust or duty for which one is responsible' and the

word *'responsible'* means: 'answerable', 'accountable (to another for something)'; 'liable to be called to account'; 'involving responsibility or obligation' or 'normally accountable for one's actions'.

Anyone in a responsible position is accountable for, and must answer for, his or her decisions or failure to take action. It is not possible to be in a responsible position without being accountable and, therefore, liable to punishment if a wrong decision is taken, or there is a failure to take an appropriate decision. Members of the medical profession, because of their considerably longer and broader training and wider experience than the other groups with whom they work, are understandably the group on whom the responsibility for taking the most important decisions falls. They should be prepared to accept the responsibility for their decisions and to be accountable for their mistakes.

Decision taking

A case in the Court of Appeal last year (February 1980), which permitted a patient in Broadmoor Hospital to sue a Health Service Union which had blocked his transfer, and led to his successfully leaving Broadmoor for another hospital, throws some further light on the concept of responsibility. The *obiter dicta*, if that is the phrase, of the judges concerned, where they commented on the responsibility for taking decisions about admission of a patient to hospital are sufficiently interesting to be worth reproducing here for the benefit of *Bulletin* readers.

One of the judges (Lord Justice Brightman) said 'It is not a practical possibility in any well ordered organization to have two independent decision-takers to exist side by side. The role of the nursing staff in decision-making on question of transfer is, in my view, a consultative role and not a decision-taking role.'

Lord Justice Bridge stated: 'Of course, it must be recognized that nurses, whether collectively or individually, in a mental hospital—or, for that matter, in any other hospital—have no doubt an extremely important consultative function to perform. But, except in the day-to-day, hour-to-hour decisions which they must necessarily make in performing their duty, and in the exercise of detailed day-to-day control and treatment of patients, nurses do not normally have any responsibility for decision-making, and they certainly, as far as I can see, do not have cast on them by the statute, either expressly or by necessary implication, any authority to take decisions of broad policy as to how the

services of the hospital should be operated. If it were otherwise . . . irreconcilable and sometimes ridiculous conflicts could arise. It is clear that in matters of policy, broad policy, as regards the operation of the hospital service, the decision rests either with the Area Health Authority or no doubt in purely medical matters with the medical staff.'

These statements are clear and should prove helpful to those psychiatrists who have doubts about defining areas of responsibility, particularly in multidisciplinary teams. The major responsibility is still that of the consultant psychiatrist.

EZRA THE SCRIBE

Forthcoming Events

'**Psychiatric Treatment—Art or Science?**' is the theme of MIND's Annual Conference to be held at Kensington Town Hall on October 26 and 27, 1981. Speakers will include the Rt Hon Patrick Jenkin, Professor Sydney Brandon, Dr Victor Meyer and Dr Heinz Wolff. Closing date for application: 2 October. Information: Conference Organizer, MIND, 22 Harley Street, London W1N 2ED (telephone: 01-637-0741).

The next meeting of the **Midland Division** of the College will be at Chesford Grange, near Warwick, from 16 to 18 October, 1981. The topics discussed will be rehabilitation in psychiatry and approval visits. On the morning of Sunday 18 October the Chairman of the Division will be presented with the Chairman's Badge of Office. Information: Dr L. I. Liebling, Highcroft Hospital, Erdington, Birmingham B23 6AX or Miss Deborah Hart at the College address.

A **one-day introductory course in child and adolescent psychiatry** for general psychiatrists and paediatricians in training has been organized by members of staff of the Institute of Child Health and the Hospital for Sick Children, Great Ormond Street. The course is intended to be of use for MRCPsych candidates and will be held at the Institute of Child Health from 12 to 16 October, 1981. Information: Sub-Dean Secretary, Institute of Child Health, 30 Guilford Street, London WC1N 1EH.

The **12th International Congress of Psychotherapy** will be held under the auspices of the International Federation for Medical Psychotherapy in Rio de Janeiro from 19 to 25 August, 1982. The theme will be 'Psychotherapy and Culture'. Information: Dr Murray Cox, Consultant Psychotherapist, Broadmoor Hospital, Crowthorne, Berkshire RG11 7EG.

A one-day symposium will be held at the Birmingham Medical Institute on 4 December 1981 entitled '**The Reproductive Epoch: Psychological Aspects of Perinatal Mortality and Fertility**'. It is aimed at psychiatrists, gynaecologists, GPs and community physicians. Information: Dr Kerry Bluglass, Department of Psychiatry, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham B15 2TH.

The **Section of Psychiatry of the Royal Society of Medicine** will be holding a series of talks throughout the rest of the year and the first half of 1982. Dr G. D. Fraser Steele will give The Presidential Address and a paper on 'The Clinicians' Dilemmas' on 13 October 1981. On 10 November 1981, Professor Gerald Russell will talk on 'Dyslexia' and on 8 December 1981 Dr Gerard Vaughan, Minister of Health, will address the Section and this will be followed by a talk by Dr Pamela Mason, 'Restructuring and Psychiatric Services'. Information: Section of Psychiatry of the Royal Society of Medicine, 1 Wimpole Street, London W1M 8AE.

A further meeting in the 'Controversies in Medicine' series entitled '**Psychotropic Drugs in Medicine: Use or Abuse**' will be held at the Royal College of Physicians at 8 p.m. on 13 October 1981. Speakers will include Sir William Trethowan and Dr. J. T. Silverstone. Attendance is open to all members of the medical profession. Information: Conference Secretary, 11 St Andrew's Place, London NW1.

A one-day study meeting for psychiatrists, psychologists and nurses interested in the **practical applications of behaviour modification** will be held at St Andrew's Hospital on 17 October 1981. Information: Mr Rodger Wood, Consultant Neuropsychologist, St Andrew's Hospital, Northampton NN1 5DG.