

## Conference briefings

### Mentally disordered offenders\*

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Offenders

People with mental health difficulties who get into the criminal justice process are not always dealt with appropriately. This has caused considerable public concern and is a problem for both the criminal justice and mental health service providers. This area of service – or the lack of it – has been the focus of national attention in the UK for many years. These problems are not unique to any one country. Dr Bertolote, Senior Medical Officer, World Health Organisation, who spoke at the International Conference, gave an update on the United Nations approach to mentally disordered offenders. Currently 43 countries are reviewing their mental health laws and the WHO are establishing guidelines for improving legislation relating to mental health, which will be published in October 1993.

The Mannheim Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice at the London School of Economics acted as host for this timely and topical conference. The lists of speakers and participants, which included those from the USA, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland, made it the first international conference on this subject.

The national development of inter-agency schemes to improve practices and services for mentally disordered offenders began in England and Wales some seven years ago.

Some of the outcomes have been appropriate diversion from prosecution and custody, lower relapse and re-offending rates, joint assessments and recommendations to the Police Courts, continuity of care at all stages in the criminal justice process and just disposals.

Because of the multiplicity of problems mentally disordered offenders present to multiple agencies, it

was essential to assist health, social and criminal justice agencies in the development of joint strategies of management changes, and also to facilitate the process of understanding of roles and responsibilities of workers in each agency. This process of change enabled practitioners and managers to share knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences in dealing with mentally disordered offenders. An international conference was a natural progression – to widen the network by sharing developments with professionals in other countries and to hear about their respective practices and services.

The conference was chaired by Lord Ennals and Lady Masham, the keynote speech was delivered by Professor Terence Morris of the LSE and papers were given by many practitioners in the field from the UK, Europe and USA, including an introductory paper by Professor Robert Bluglass.

Much has already been achieved in enabling people prominent in the professions and organisations to work together without the inhibitions and barriers which have previously bedevilled proper collaboration. But much remains to be done, particularly in making available finance and resources across the boundaries of statutory authorities.

A summary of issues raised included human rights, particularly in Eastern Europe, appropriate housing for the mentally ill, an emphasis on the possibilities of treatment (after much doubt having been cast on this in some circles), the debate about welfare v. justice and the coercion of minor offenders, and quite importantly community care and residential care. The wholesale abandonment of residential establishments was questioned.

Over 200 people attended the conference; the next will be held in Phoenix, Arizona, USA in November 1993. Information about this and the conference papers which are being prepared for publication at the LSE are obtainable from Dorothy Tonak, telephone 0296 713439.

\*Conference held at the London School of Economics from 28–30 September 1992.