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EDITORIAL

The call for more research in Mental Handicap is very insistent, but there are also voices suggesting that research has already come up with sufficient information which would be useful in practical work. The need is, at present, not so much for more research results but for making adequate use of findings obtained so far. There is, of course, an understandable hesitancy to embark on new courses of action on the basis of investigations and experiments carried out in laboratories or with restricted experimental populations, and thereby exposing reasonably functioning organisations to unknown consequences. There is also hesitancy in transferring findings and conclusions obtained in different conditions to one's own circumstances and applying knowledge which has been set down in form of an article with statistical evidence on Subjects A, B and C to the live realities of a schoolroom, a dayroom or a workshop with people known as John, Jane and Mary.

The unwillingness to jump forward when it seems preferable to stand still or only slowly to edge forward, and the inability to appreciate that individuals like John, Jane and Mary actually form those faceless groups known as "Experimental and Control Groups" are to a great extent responsible for the slow advance through application of findings. One must ruefully confess that on those occasions when there is a significant surge forward despite this cautious attitude, the driving force is not provided by scientific enlightenment but by human emotions. Of course, emotional argument may be reinforced by selected scientific evidence. Yet institutions for the mentally handicapped are condemned as "bad" because people nowadays dislike institutions as such, rather than because the evidence might show that the institutional way leads to a negative outcome. Only on a few occasions sheer despair in the ineffectiveness of the methods practised so far leads to the grudging adoption of scientific procedures despite emotional resistance - as witnessed by the desperate turning to conditioning and behaviour modification in the case of the profoundly mentally handicapped.

Frequently scientific data and methods are only looked at in connection with "political" arguments - as in the case of institutions - or as a last recourse as in the case of behaviour modification. There is no real widespread application of scientific thinking and acting in ordinary day to day situations, partly because researchers hug their expertise to themselves for fear of misuse, partly because would-be users, the practitioners, are mystified by the elaborate safeguards and cautionary caveats. Yet for the practitioner the results of investigations ought to be the inspiration for experimenting in his particular setting. Whilst the researcher has to adhere carefully to the rules of his craft, the practitioner has the privilege of eclectic raids into territories which invite exploration for the purpose of exploitation and export.

In this issue of the BJMS the practitioner ought to find again encouragement for transferring ideas, and possibilities to his own area of work which may often be rather different from those described by the researcher. For example, the practices developed by

speechtherapists in the Adult Training Centre (see "Instructor Participation . . .") would also be useful in other settings like schools, institutions, hostels, irrespective whether staff are teachers, nurses or residential care workers. Indeed the teaching package might be used with advantage for other specialised situations. - "Care" takes only too often the form of "minding" the severely handicapped child or adult rather than that of "developing" him systematically and intensively. To some extent this practice depends on a failure to organise one's time and resources adequately and it is in this context that the report on "Effect of management procedures . . ." should be carefully studied. Observations such as that staff enjoyed changing roles in intensive but tiring work, that increasing the number of staff is not as productive as examining the nature of their interactions with their charges, could lead to important organisational changes. - We probably do not need scientific support for accepting that a normal environment is better for the mentally handicapped than institutional storage. Strong evidence may, however be required in support of a demand that even in a helpful environment a training programme is essential and must not be omitted and that the use of sophisticated equipment may be counterproductive and hinder rather than assist development (see "Normalised Physical Environment . . ."). Information as supplied by research of this kind will be needed to avoid traps created by our desire to improve existing arrangements simply through adhering to "commonsense" solutions. - Findings regarding communication problems encountered by one set of parents when dealing with professionals (see "Down's Syndrome . . .") apply to all parents faced with this situation. Up-to-date knowledge on encouraging developments must be made available to parents when re-assurance is needed most. What should be done locally to ensure that those people who matter, are made aware of the great changes that have taken place and are still about to come? - Considerable planning is carried out on the basis of Table V of "Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped". It would be useful if government and voluntary bodies were to study the Sheffield findings (see "The Distribution of the Mentally Handicapped . . ."). They draw attention to the necessity for collecting detailed local information for planning according to needs rather than suppositions.

Much can be learned by studying the rationale underlying attempted solutions and by listening to the pros and cons of different presentations. Sitting in on discussions by scientists can only help in increasing the practitioner's awareness and receptiveness for some useful research findings, which need, however, translation into human terms if they are to become effective influences. In this way we might be able to construct a new set of environmental conditions which provide new starting points for further endeavour. We must, after all, not forget that the wide spread of applied research results today will, most likely, affect the situation tomorrow to such an extent that new research must start from new premises.