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EDITORIAL

Once in a while an editorial must be permitted to deal with matters pertaining not necessarily to the present or tomorrow but, exceptionally, to yesterday - in this particular case to the yesterday of forty years ago. This was the time when the Midland Mental Deficiency Society was formed which in due course became the British Society for the Study of Mental Subnormality, the sponsoring body of the British Journal of Mental Subnormality.

Going back those forty years and celebrating the fortieth birthday gives an opportunity for recalling some of the historical background of those times which were responsible for the formation of the Society (which was then domiciled at the various institutions for mentally handicapped people in the "Midlands" of the UK). It is also an opportunity to correct the misconception that it was only a society of medical superintendents, a misconception which arose from the fact that the medical superintendents were then the only people in a position to extend hospitality to the meetings of the Society.

It is an important fact that with the foundation of the Midland Society in 1952 the first multidisciplinary professional body dealing with mental handicap was created in England. At the constituting meeting the founders - doctors working in the various institutions of the Midlands - decided that membership of the Society should also be open to non-medical professionals and this important revolutionary step in a field up to then regarded as being solely a medical-nursing domain was of tremendous significance. This new approach was emphasised when the present writer, a psychologist, became the second chairman of the Society and when a social worker followed him as the next chairman.

The Society created a neutral meeting ground and platform for people representing different disciplines in different regions of the Midlands to get to know each other and to become acquainted with their different approaches to and views of common problems. It was a valuable factor in strengthening the feeling of partnership despite the legal dominance of medical colleagues and in breaking down the isolation of professions behind institution walls.

The role of the Society in providing a multidisciplinary exchange forum was immensely strengthened by progressive actions taking place elsewhere. The dawning of a new Zeitgeist in mental handicap was observable in the odd institution where developments took place which broke with traditions. Some more forward looking medical colleagues had realised that they themselves could and should initiate changes in practices and approaches and they faced their more traditionally thinking colleagues with often unpalatable and disturbing innovations.

This stage of a reformed institutional approach was particularly furthered by the encouragement given by two medical superintendents, who, unfortunately left very little published work and therefore little testimony of their contribution to new practices. One of them was Dr. MacMahon, the Physician Superintendent of the Manor Hospital, Epsom in Surrey, who opened the doors of his institution to the diligent and, at that time, challenging research work of the first generation of psychologists in mental deficiency: A. D. B. Clarke, Ann Clarke, B. Tizard and N. O'Connor. Their work about the doubtful value of intelligence testing, the distribution of intelligence levels in institutions, environmental influences on cognitive development, abilities of severely handicapped people in industrial tasks, employability of mentally handicapped people etc. threw new and disturbing floods of light on the practices pursued in a field which had been regarded as a backwater of medical quiet comfortable living.

In the Midlands the first president of the Midland Society, Dr. C. J. C. Earl, the Medical Superintendent of Mönihull Colony, fought a lonely battle against public prejudice and the diffidence, distrust and antagonism of his medical colleagues who did not welcome his untraditional actions. He was the first and only original thinker of his generation and put forward the idea that people with a cognitive deficit had also personality problems which required professional help - an approach that even today has not been further developed.¹⁾ He recognised the need to do more for adults with a mental handicap than training for work and appointed the first Education and Training Officer from outside the medical/nursing field. This resulted in a widely recognised and imitated social education programme for adults which was designed to prepare them for life outside the institution walls²⁾.

Earl, one feels, must have shocked many of his colleagues with his prophetic and revolutionary thoughts in his address on "Post-War Institutions"³⁾ delivered to the Royal Medico-Psychological Association in March 1943 long before changes in institutional practices were widely discussed and later realised. It is worthwhile to quote at length from this unpublished paper to appreciate the beginning of a restlessness within the professions represented in the Midland Society which prepared the ground for much that followed in later years.

Earl still considered in his address the institution "an integral part of a Mental Health Service for the Subnormal", but wanted many aspects quite

considerably changed. He demanded at a time when institutions relied heavily on the labour contribution by high-grade mentally defective patients that "we are out to train our patients. If possible we are out to socialise them . . . patients capable of first rate work shouldn't be in the Institution . . . we should reckon our profits - even from the strictly financial viewpoint - in terms of patients returned to society rather than in terms of baskets woven or envelopes made". And he admitted that in consequence of this policy "the output of my own shops has fallen in recent years. And we have had to employ one or two extra farm hands and install electric milking. But I have sent nearly 200 patients on licence and have a further 50 on daily work outside." Some other points Earl made at that time must have caused his audience to wonder whether a medical fifth column was about to destroy their medical empire. Earl asked prophetically in 1942: "Why nurses? The sick obviously need it . . . low grades and chronic cripples also need the type of nursing known "as the care of the chronic sick" . . . but the rest of patients aren't sick. They may need teachers, trainers, or guides, counsellors and friends. But they don't need nurses . . . So let us for Heaven's sake stop pretending that we do".

One other point of Earl's address must be singled out here, because his thinking was so much ahead of his time. Turning to "non-medical staff," Earl mentioned as the first one the psychologist and asked the rhetorical question "How many colonies in England today employ one?" knowing full well that there was at that time probably no other than the one psychologist employed by him. He continued "We certainly need more. And in taking them on to our staff we should allow them a status equal to our own . . . The Chief Supervisor of training should preferably be an Industrial Psychologist . . . we must recognise the status and training of the clinical psychologist if we are to get the full benefit of his services. I do not refer to testing alone - or even principally - but to problems of education, training, and social adaptation."

Earl, it must be said had anticipated many of the innovations which came about much later and had encouraged other medical superintendents to reform many features and practices in their places, though the hard core of traditionalists remained unconvinced. Nevertheless the beginning of a new epoch in institutional treatment where "certified mentally defectives" were given many and repeated trials of establishing themselves in the open community can be dated from C. J. C. Earl's time, signified by his historic paper in 1942.

It was perhaps not surprising that such revolutionary thinking originating in an institution situated in the Midlands, the Society's very territory, was reflected in papers and discussions at the meetings and the Society's "Proceedings" were soon also in demand outside the Midlands and developed into the present Journal.

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The British Society for the Study of Mental Subnormality has decided that the forty years of its contribution to the development of better practices in mental handicap work should be commemorated in some form.

The BSSMS presents therefore every subscriber to the BJMS with a copy of the monograph "DESPITE MENTAL HANDICAP"⁴). This contains a very rare analysis of ten years' rehabilitative work with adult mentally handicapped people who were being prepared for life in the open community. It is hoped it will induce readers to consider seriously the value of the approach described and stimulate and encourage them to follow this model. Even though the practices demonstrated in this monograph needed present day opportunities, the foundations of the approach were laid in a very real sense in those times which were so conducive for the foundation of the Midland Society. C. J. C. Earl had stressed the value of careful psychological assessments and the present writer developed in those times the use of assessment for teaching, training, monitoring and evaluating of rehabilitation work. A technique which has proved useful over forty years of substantial changes in mental handicap practice contains perhaps not merely a valuable, but a vital factor which should not be disregarded in the course of further changes. Future issues of the BJMS will endeavour to provide additional evidence for the relevance of monitoring carefully and objectively the consequences of new policies.

With the publication of this monograph the Society hopes to have made another contribution to its declared aims, namely: "to mobilise, foster and encourage interest in any of the problems and aspects of Mental Handicap".

H. C. Gunzburg

- 1) C. J. C. Earl (1961), *Subnormal Personalities: their clinical investigation and assessment*. London: Bailliere, Tindall and Cox.
- 2) H. C. Gunzburg (1960), *Social Rehabilitation of the Subnormal*. London: Bailliere, Tindall and Cox.
- 3) C. J. C. Earl (1943), *Post War Institutions*. (*Privately printed*).
- 4) H. C. Gunzburg (Ed.), (1992), *Despite Mental Handicap*. (Monograph) *British Journal of Mental Subnormality*.

NOTE: In 1990 and 1991 the British Society for the Study of Mental Subnormality invited papers on "Longitudinal Studies" dealing with education and training of mentally handicapped adults. We are pleased to point out that the Study on "Wentwood Education" submitted by Dr. Janice Sinson has been accepted for publication and is contained in Sections III, IV, V and VI of the monograph *DESPITE MENTAL HANDICAP*.