

Conference briefings

Revolving doors*

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This conference marked the official launch of 'Revolving Doors', a report commissioned by the Thames/LWT Telethon Trust on the plight of people who move between the criminal justice system, psychiatric services and homelessness.

It was reported that many of the 50,000 homeless people in hostels have a history of mental illness, and between a third and a half of the 5,000 people sleeping rough nationally are currently mentally ill. Following even petty offences, they are remanded in custody on account of their vulnerability or because their homelessness prejudices bail. It was therefore not surprising to hear that 17% of remand prisoners are homeless.

Institute of Criminology/Institute of Psychiatry findings were described: few people remanded on grounds of mental vulnerability warranted hospital admission, highlighting the need for diversion to community care. Also, paradoxically, the more ill people were, the longer they were found to spend on remand.

It was suggested that these people are denied appropriate care for a variety of reasons: they are unlikely to receive priority; services are inaccessible or inflexible; people with no local connections may not qualify for services such as housing; anti-social behaviour alienates those in a position to help; and agencies are poorly coordinated.

However, the conference was told of new services, such as hostels, Court-based psychiatric assessment schemes, and initiatives to facilitate bail or discontinuance of proceedings. The increasingly supportive role of the Probation Service in aftercare was also highlighted.

**Conference held at Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, 6 March 1992.*

The £21M Mental Illness Specific Grant and other similar funds were commended, but it was noted that most existing funding is short-term, compared to the long-term problems these people face.

The pilot study proposed in the report, to be partially funded by Telethon, was generally welcomed but immediate interventions were also called for – costing a proper service, increasing housing, hostel places and community care overall, developing accessible and flexible services specifically for this group, providing more top-sliced and ring-fenced funds, and having money 'follow the person' as does the Independent Living Fund. It was also suggested that a 'synthesis' of good practice for national use should be drawn from existing initiatives around the country.

The overriding theme was the need for the various statutory and voluntary bodies to have clearly defined responsibilities and accountability, and to be coordinated effectively. The conference, with over 90 agencies represented, showed that the potential for this cooperation exists.

The conference was chaired by Lord Ennals, President of MIND and a Telethon Trustee, and the panel comprised Terry Bamford, Executive Director of Housing and Social Services for Kensington and Chelsea, David Browning, Associate Director of the Audit Commission, Dominic Byrne, Director of Communications for Shelter, Sir Alan Greengross, Chairman of Bloomsbury and Islington Health Authority, Dr Adrian Grounds, Lecturer in Forensic Psychiatry at Cambridge University, Tony Leach, Deputy Chief Probation Officer for the Inner London Probation Service, Helen McKinnon, Principal Officer of the Home Office Mental Health Division, and Judy Weleminsky, Director of the National Council of Voluntary Organizations and a Telethon Trustee.

The 36 page report is available from NACRO Publications, 169 Clapham Road, London SW9 0PU, price £3.00.