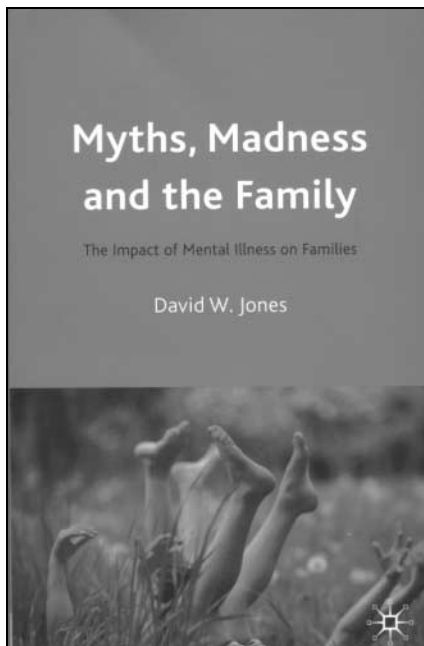


Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN, FEMI OYEBODE and ROSALIND RAMSAY

Myths, Madness and the Family. The Impact of Mental Illness on Families

By David W. Jones. Basingstoke: Palgrave. 2001. 208 pp. £16.99 (pb). ISBN 0 333 77618 6



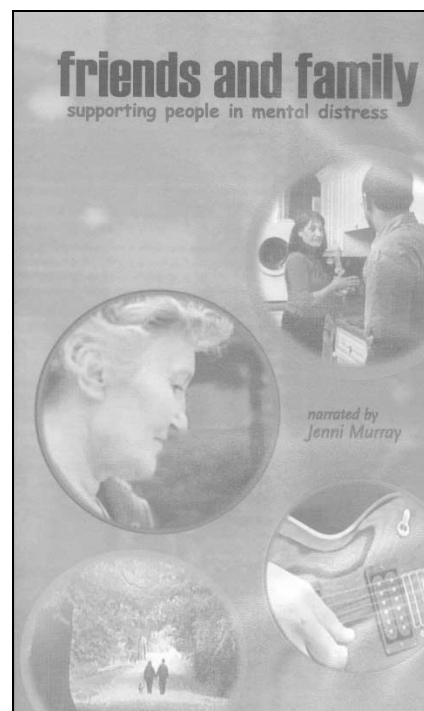
Friends and Family: Supporting People in Mental Distress

London: Mental Health Medic. 2001. £74.95 (video and 32-page accompanying leaflet.)

As a non-scientist, I view the conventional incremental approach to advances in the scientific community as something of a millstone and a bar to progress, rather than as a safe way of edging back the frontiers of knowledge. Leaps of faith like acceptance of complexity theory are rendered almost impossible by the gradualist brick-on-brick approach to research. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of mental health, where there has been a painful and yet to be completed shift from a medical to a holistic view of mental illness. Equally challenging has been acceptance of the fact that 'holistic' should not mean 'the whole user' but 'the user and his carers, family and circle of support'.

By focusing on the families of mental health service users and the concept of family, Jones in *Myths, Madness and the Family* has attempted to break the mould, which he regards as inhibiting a full and proper analysis of the role and function of families and carers in the context of mental illness: they are not peripheral to the situation, instead 'families themselves have been active in shaping responses to mental illness', and are 'a useful resource'.

Friends and Family: Supporting People in Mental Distress, a straightforward package of video and booklet, takes a similar approach and presents the care of a mentally ill relative or friend in terms of a series of joint learning experiences, rather than as a rigid checklist of things to do and not to do. The video, which features a small number of carers and users, all articulate and willing to explore difficult areas, allows viewers to acquire both a sense of not being alone in the problems they face and also an awareness of the fact that, despite the realisation that every



circumstance is unique, what they share far outweighs their differences.

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A General Practitioner's Guide to Managing Severe Mental Illness

By Alan Cohen and Swaran Singh. London: Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. 2001. 22 pp. £5 (pb). ISBN 1 870480 51 1

Setting the Standard: The New Agenda for Primary Care Organisations Commissioning Mental Health Services

London: Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. 2001. 32 pp. £10 (pb). ISBN 1 870480 49 X

A General Practitioner's Guide to Managing Severe Mental Illness is described as a booklet for busy general practitioners (GPs) and primary health care teams. Short, snappy and pragmatic at 22 pages with a couple of Martin Davies cartoons to brighten up the text, it is based both on common sense and an increasingly robust evidence base. The structure is logical and the content grounded in the reality of general practice so that workload issues as well as the mechanics of developing more structured services are discussed. There is also a healthy emphasis on care pathways and, in theory, a 'user perspective of the service provided' although the latter seems to me to be sadly missing. There is, for example, no debate about the ethical and philosophical dilemmas inherent in the creation of practice registers, the possibility and consequences of indefinite registration, and the impact this might have on notions of recovery (Barr & Cotterill, 1999). Overall, however, this is a useful and timely guide, with the advent of the new General Medical Services GP contract (with 23 points for developing and delivering more structured care for people with serious mental illness) making it a 'must-have' for every practice.

Political zeitgeist can, or course, work both ways; although *Setting the Standard* was published in the same year, the raft of policy reforms in the past 2 years including *Shifting the Balance of Power* and The Health and Social Care Act 2001 mean that the messages and even the language used in this booklet now look a little dated and

perhaps oversimplistic. It describes the results of a survey sent to 481 primary care groups (PCGs) in 2000 to review the commissioning skills available to PCGs. After discussing the results from the 179 PCGs who returned the questionnaire, the booklet then details 11 standards for commissioning mental health services generated by an expert panel. In comparison with other similar work (Wilkin *et al*, 2001) little methodological detail is given, which inevitably affects the validity and reliability of the conclusions. Primary care trust (PCT) commissioners interested in responding to the complexities of mental

health also need to understand its place within the broader health and clinical governance context (Rogers *et al*, 2002), which *Setting the Standard*, based on a survey 9 months after PCGs were officially created, is unable to provide. The result is a snapshot of a particular point in time, of historical interest perhaps, but not a living tool that many PCTs would now find helpful in guiding them through the commissioning maze.

Barr, W. & Cotterill, L. (1999) Registering concern: the case of primary care registers for people with severe

enduring mental illness. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, **7**, 427–433.

Rogers, A., Campbell, S., Gask, L., et al (2002) Some National Service Frameworks are more equal than others: implementing clinical governance for mental health on primary care groups and trusts. *Journal of Mental Health*, **11**, 199–212.

Wilkin, D., Gillam, S. & Coleman, A. (2001) *The National Tracker Survey of Primary Care Groups and Trusts 2000/20001: Modernising the NHS*. Manchester: University of Manchester.

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