

It is perhaps a paradox that the successful adoption of a multiprofessional approach requires the full support, and even leadership, of the consultant psychiatrist. Some would regard this as a professional own goal. Others, including myself, see it as an essential component of comprehensive care, in forensic psychiatry as much as any other field.

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Confidential 'phone-in' for teenagers

ALEXANDER BURNFIELD, Consultant in Child and Family Psychiatry, The Family Consultancy, Charlton Road Health Centre, Andover, Hampshire SP10 3LD

Ocean Sound, an independent Hampshire radio station, broadcasts pop music on a channel known as 'Power FM'. The presenter/producer of Power FM occasionally asks a guest 'expert' to talk briefly about a particular subject and then listeners are invited to phone directly for a confidential talk during the following hour. At the end of the allotted hour the 'expert' comes on the air again with some concluding remarks and additional information.

Preparation

I agreed to take calls on Ocean Sound's 'Power FM' direct line between 9.30 and 10.30 p.m. one Thursday evening in January. The subject was 'emotional problems faced by young people during adolescence'. It was agreed that this would include family problems, difficulties at school or college, anxieties about physical development and problems in relationships.

I decided that the best way to prepare myself was to obtain background information from the

Winchester Health Authority's Education Centre Library and from 'Help for Health', a Wessex Regional Health Information Centre based in Southampton. The first of these provided me with an up-to-date list of local self-help groups and contacts relevant to the needs of adolescents. The second sent me a range of leaflets together with several lists of local groups, contacts and counselling telephone numbers.

My wife, Penny, and I organised this information before the broadcast. The leaflets ranged from 'acne' to 'AIDS' and from 'birth control' to 'how to stop smoking'. Contacts and telephone numbers of groups included 'anorexia nervosa', 'drug abuse', 'asthma' and 'depression', together with a variety of other subjects.

The interview

We eventually found 'Ocean Sound' on a deserted industrial estate, and decided that while I answered the telephone calls Penny would pass me appropriate

information. The presenter was a young man of 19 and he welcomed us with coffee. He had been publicising the evening's phone-in during the day from time-to-time and we discussed the programme together.

The presenter introduced me by name, describing me as a doctor with interest and experience in the emotional and relationship problems of teenagers and young people. He did not use the word 'psychiatrist' at my own special request. I then talked on the air for a few minutes about the sort of problems that teenagers sometimes had, including within the family, at school or college, and in personal relationships. I gave some examples including teenagers who could not talk to their parents, people who were anxious about exams, and teenagers who were concerned about their relationships with the opposite sex. I also mentioned that some adolescents have concerns about their appearance and weight, together with their physical development.

The phone-in

I was then shown to a separate telephone which had three incoming lines. Each of these would flash if a caller was on the line. To receive a call required switching to the appropriate line when it flashed. In this way it was possible to see whether or not there were one or more callers waiting to be put through. All calls were totally confidential and none were broadcast on the air.

The lights began to start flashing almost as soon as I was at my post. I was busy continuously for about 25 minutes. After that there was a lull, and the presenter gave another 'plug' for the phone-in over the air. This led to more activity on the lines and I continued to be busy after that until the hour was up.

The problems

During the direct line confidential phone-in, which lasted one hour, I received at least 20 calls in all. There were also several callers who hung up once they had got through, without saying anything. The first call that I received was from a girl who spoke hesitantly. She asked me why I was there but she hung up as soon as I suggested that she might like to talk about something that was worrying her.

Most of the other calls were from teenage girls with boy-friend problems. For instance, one girl of 14 felt picked-on by a group of fifth year boys at her school.

She said that they accused her of 'using them' and she thought that this might have been true. She asked me if I thought that she should give up boys altogether. Another girl was concerned because she was tonguetied with a boy that she fancied. Yet another was worried that she might make a fool of herself if she told a boy that she liked him. One call turned out to be a group of girls singing raucously. Afterwards they told me their names in an excitable manner. Another girl phoned in connection with a competition by mistake.

However, although there were some apparently superficial calls there were also some serious ones including a girl of 16 worried that her breasts were very small and another girl of 16 who had put on several stones after having a baby. There was also a nervous girl who had not got any friends and who was not eating properly.

A few boys phoned up including one who fancied his best friend's girlfriend and another who thought that his girlfriend would stop taking the pill and get pregnant in order to make him stay in the area. The final call was from a young man whose father had died some months previously and who had experienced a recurrence of grief recently. This was associated with sexual problems with his girlfriend and he was scared that she would leave him. In many cases it was possible to offer 'mini-counselling' or simple reassurance and this usually resulted in thanks for my help. In other cases I was able to give an appropriate telephone number for one of the counselling services in the caller's area, or suggest that they made an appointment to see their family doctor.

Comment

After I had finished the phone-in I went on the air again for a few minutes and summed up the sort of calls that I had received. Most were associated with relationship problems or self-image and, interestingly, none involved anxiety connected with school work or exams. Finally, I gave out the telephone number of 'Help for Health'. They had provided me with a great deal of useful information and are also available to help consumers directly.

Help for Health, Health Information Centre, Grant Building, Southampton General Hospital, Southampton SO9 4XY, telephones Southampton (0703) 779091 or Southampton (0703) 777222, extension 3753.