

Giving Mental Illness Its Research Due

Mental disorders get short shrift in research and treatment; new initiatives are forming to redress the imbalance

MENTAL illnesses, in comparison with other medical disorders, have always received disproportionately low shares of research and treatment resources. The main reason, as explained in a number of sessions at the recent annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), is the public stigma attached to mental illnesses. Lately, however, there are signs that these may be the latest in the parade of stigmatized conditions that have been coming out of the closet over the past two decades.

Direct care costs for mental illness top \$36 billion annually, and schizophrenics occupy 40% of all long-term hospital beds, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Yet the fiscal year 1987 research budget for NIMH is slated at less than \$200 million. The federal research dollar per patient is \$14 for schizophrenia and \$10 for depression. The equivalent for heart disease is \$130; for muscular dystrophy it is \$10,000, says NIMH. Depression results in 16,000 suicides a year among adolescents alone.

A significant result of the general aversion to the subject of mental illness is that the private sector has never rallied to the cause as it has for so many other medical disorders. Frederick K. Goodwin, the NIMH intramural research director, points out that while private money accounts for half of the rest of biomedical research, the government pays for 85% of research on mental illness.

The picture may be changing, however. The better scientific grounds for pursuing research on mental illness are becoming more solid as scientists are coming close to identifying biological bases for schizophrenia and depression, as well as of other disorders such as phobias and compulsions. Many mental patients are now getting well, thanks to advances in pharmacology. Studies have shown that psychotherapy can work, and that its availability in health plans can reduce other medical costs.

Members of the public are finally getting mobilized. Two new patient advocacy organizations have sprung up where none existed before, and major new public education initiatives are now in the offing.

Ironically, President Reagan, who narrowly escaped being assassinated by a schizophrenic, may have inadvertently done greater service to the cause than any other chief executive. John Hinckley's father Jack Hinckley has become a major advocate for research and education on mental illness and in 1983 started a new National Mental Health Fund. Last year, with the help of former NIMH director Herbert Pardes and psychiatrist Paul Fink of the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, he persuaded the Advertising Council to sponsor a nationwide public education campaign. For \$500,000 a year, the industry-supported Ad Council, which runs various public interest advertising campaigns, will be blanketing the country with \$20 million worth of public messages, similar to cancer information campaigns, that will include a list of warning signs for mental illness.

In a recent poll, only 1% of the respondents regarded mental illness as a major health problem.

More or less simultaneously with this initiative, NIMH has begun one of its own, project DART (Depression Awareness, Recognition, and Treatment). Run by Joyce Lazar, NIMH chief of prevention research, this is to be a multiyear effort—similar to National Institutes of Health campaigns on cancer and high blood pressure—supported jointly by drug companies, foundations, and the government. So far, NIMH has run several planning workshops for primary care providers, mental health specialists, and the public. The campaign has a science advisory group of depression researchers and a campaign advisory group that will be meeting in June to map out media strategies.

Meanwhile, families of the mentally ill as well as former mental patients themselves are becoming increasingly organized and

vocal. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, formed in 1979, has been growing by leaps and bounds. The alliance, which operates through local chapters, now numbers 585 groups, with a new one being added every 36 hours. About 30,000 families now participate, most of them families of schizophrenics.

Finally, this spring the first association devoted to a particular mental illness was formed: the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association. Headed by ex-patient Marilyn Weiss of Chicago, this group is made up primarily of depression sufferers. It promises to have an aggressively activist stance, judging by the bumper sticker passed out at a Capitol Hill reception: "Honk if you're on Lithium." Lithium, which is an effective treatment for 85% of manic-depressives, is often cited as an example of what more research could accomplish, since it is estimated by NIMH to have saved the country \$6.5 billion in medical costs over the past 15 years.

Prominent people are increasingly lending their support to the cause. *Washington Post* publisher Katherine Graham, whose late husband, Philip, was a manic-depressive, appeared at the reception to speak of the anguish of the disease in the "prelithium" days. Several members of Congress showed up to celebrate the new organization, including House speaker Tip O'Neill (D-MA) and Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM) and Representative Silvio Conte (R-MA), both of whom serve on appropriations committees for the Department of Health and Human Services.

Educating the public about mental illness seems to be long overdue. At the APA meeting, Steven Sharfstein, the association's deputy medical director, said comparable household surveys made in 1957 and 1976 showed no change in the percentage of people who wanted psychiatric help but dared not seek it. He said 25% of the respondents who wanted help failed to seek it either because of the stigma or the lack of insurance coverage. According to the NIMH, only one in ten who need psychiatric help get it.

The widespread aversion to the whole subject of mental illness arises in part because of the frightening and incomprehensible ways it is manifested, but also because a sizeable portion of the public—55% according to one poll—does not believe that it exists. Mental retardation, which has a long history of private advocacy, is readily understood to be biological in nature. But while modern science believes that the mind cannot exist separately from the brain, the public still implicitly endorses mind-body dualism in its belief that insanity results

from such qualities as weakness of character. Paradoxically, insanity is also regarded as incurable—so, it is seen as nonbiological but immutable.

John S. Bartolomeo, head of a market research firm, reported that a recent CBS-*New York Times* poll showed that only 1% of the respondents thought mental illness was a major health problem. However the NIMH has concluded, from a national study completed 2 years ago, that 20% will have a diagnosable mental disorder over their lifetimes. Although there are no well-developed scales to measure attitudes toward mental illness, stigma, which underwent a decline in the 1960's, has not declined significantly since 1970, said Bartolomeo.

The extent of public ignorance about major mental illness is evidenced in a recent survey by Otto Wahl, a psychologist at George Mason University. In a study to be

published in the *Journal of Community Psychiatry*, Wahl surveyed over 500 people in the Washington, D.C., area, including community groups, college students, and police trainees, on what they knew about schizophrenia (which afflicts 1% of the population). It turned out that their general perceptions were at least 30 years out of date, conforming with the classic Freudian description of neurosis. "Psychosis" was an unfamiliar concept, and only half were aware that hallucinations accompany the disease. Sixty-five percent believed the disease involved multiple personalities. Respondents generally subscribed to a Freudian view of etiology—that is, that the illness is caused by traumatic childhood events—and believed individual psychotherapy was the most common treatment. But they also believed the disorder was incurable.

George Gerbner of the Annenberg School

of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania says the media are even more backward than the public in its conceptions of mental illness, and generally portray the mentally ill as homicidal maniacs. He says the main public perception is still derived from the Hitchcock thriller *Psycho*. Mentally ill people are seen as dangerous, unpredictable, and irrational and most people believe "you can't tell a crazy until they go berserk," says Gerbner. He also says there is no differentiation among mental illnesses in the public mind. "There are two categories: crazy or normal."

Urban dwellers are becoming increasingly aware of mental illness as the ranks of the homeless mentally ill continue to swell. But it seems that sophisticated and long-term public education efforts will be necessary to make inroads on ancient and deep-rooted prejudices. ■ **CONSTANCE HOLDEN**

Packard Report Makes a Plea for Universities

The study, by a panel of the White House Science Council, urges greater investment in academic research, more flexible funding, and less micromanagement of grantees

A long-awaited report by the White House Science Council on the state of health of the nation's universities was finally unveiled on 15 May at a round of press briefings and congressional hearings.* Its message, that the universities are in need of a sustained infusion of new money and that the terms of the government-university partnership need to be reconsidered, drew a sympathetic response on Capitol Hill.

But, at a time of severe constraints on the federal budget, the proposed remedies may be difficult to sell. It is also not clear who will do the selling because the report was requested by the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), but no permanent OSTP director has been nominated to replace George A. Keyworth, II, who left almost 5 months ago.

The report, prepared by a panel chaired by David Packard, co-founder and chairman of the board of Hewlett-Packard, and D.

Allan Bromley of Yale University, is little changed from a draft that was presented to the White House Science Council in January (*Science*, 31 January 1986, p. 447). It states, "One conclusion is clear: our universities today simply cannot respond to society's expectations of them or discharge their national responsibilities in research and education without substantially increased support."

In particular, the study pointed to the deteriorating equipment in many university laboratories and the red tape associated with federal support of academic science as cause for special concern.

Pointing out that in 1984, only \$8 billion of the nearly \$100 billion in total national research and development was performed in the universities, the report urges the federal government to make "substantially greater investments in our centers of learning in the 1990's than in the 1970's." However, acknowledging that "the source of funding in these times of fiscal stringency is not obvious," it suggests that "Reallocation of R&D

appropriations appears to be the most probable source."

Says Bromley, "Simply put, unless we take decisive action now, for the first time in our national history the higher education enterprise that we pass on to our children and grandchildren will be less healthy, less able to respond to national needs, and less worthy of the great traditions of American education than the enterprise we ourselves inherited."

Among the panel's chief recommendations are the following:

■ A program should be established in the National Science Foundation to provide \$5 billion in federal funds for university facilities over the next 10 years. The federal funds should be matched by at least an equal sum from non-federal sources, and proposals submitted to NSF should be peer reviewed.

■ A new initiative to provide bright undergraduates with substantial scholarship support should be launched. The report recommends that 1% of the most able undergraduate students in mathematics, engineering, and the natural sciences be given 4-year scholarships of \$15,000 per year, which could be held at whatever institution they choose. The panel says that the estimated \$120-million cost of the program is "perhaps the single wisest investment that we, as a nation, could make."

■ In order to cut some of the bureaucracy and make funding more flexible, the average duration of grants should be increased to at least 3, and preferably, 5 years. In addition, investigators should be free to use up to 10% of their grants on a discretionary basis and "federal agencies, except in the cases of

*A *Renewed Partnership*, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Executive Office of the President, Washington, DC 20506.