

Adolescent Health in Britain

The March 1987 meeting in Sydney was for someone like me, working with teenagers in Britain, a breath of fresh air. Adolescent work in Britain has traditionally been carried out piecemeal by enthusiastic individuals and small voluntary groups up and down the country who have worked largely in isolation and without the support of their colleagues in the 'grown up' world of medicine and the statutory services.

The importance of helping young people through the often painful period of growing up has been underestimated by professional groups whose attitude appears to be one of deprecating both those involved with young people and the youngsters themselves. The image is created of dishevelled teachers who are 'too familiar' and encourage disorder, 'trendy' social workers - 'I expect he is on drugs too'. After all why bother with teenagers when half the problems are ones they will grow out of and the other are of their own making. They have made their beds and should lie on them, why waste funds on 'services' for delinquents! No wonder that the enthusiastic few often succumb leaving even sparser resources.

How refreshing therefore to hear the youth presentations in Sydney and the feedback from the Korobora conference, young people interested in their health, able to articulate their needs in a confident fashion and attempting to tell us where we had got it wrong. Best of all, I had the impression that the 'professional bodies' present, including the government, were actually listening.

On returning to Britain, my once flagging enthusiasm now recharged, I was determined to make some changes. We decided that it was time to coordinate the efforts of our colleagues, to give each other professional support and to further Adolescent health. Accordingly "Youth Support" set up a multidisciplinary "Forum on Adolescent Health and Welfare" which we wished to be affiliated to the International Association of Adolescent Health. Our aims were to encourage cooperation between the various professionals and voluntary bodies involved in care of young people and provide the impetus to carry us forward to a better system of care. We would also hope to obtain government recognition of a) Our Forum; b) The needs of young people; c) Adolescent health and Welfare as a discipline in its own right.

The Forum was launched in October 1987 at the Royal Society of Medicine, speakers included representatives from 'Youth Support', voluntary organisations such as the NSPCC and Childline (for the protection of abused youngsters), the Brook Advisory service (family planning), Ann McCarthy

from Dublin speaking on the International Association and a member of parliament. A great deal of interest was generated and the proceedings of the meeting have been reported in our newly launched 'Journal of Adolescent Health and Welfare'.

Our enthusiasm in making a new beginning for adolescent health in this country must be tempered by the words of one of our delegates at the October meeting. Professor Russell, who works in London and Jerusalem, sounded a warning note ".... here there is room for anger, there are many qualities of adolescence which should be preserved in ourselves but why I use the term anger is that is what I feel about the situation in this country. the community which should be educated is the professional community, but particularly the paediatric community. Their concern with children and the definition of adolescence is one of their problems. We have been preaching for a long time without effect. I date my attempt to get an adolescent unit going in this country to 1954 .. the reason why it was not established was because the British Paediatric association wrote a report denying the need ... what we cannot achieve by medical means, we must achieve by political means!"

There is a need to change the image of adolescent health. We must foster the cooperation and support of our colleagues. The very nature of work with teenagers makes it imperative that it be a multidisciplinary approach, this fact alone may lead to some loss of credibility from the more entrenched factions of medicine. However we need to win over these factions and prove ourselves as a competent professional body established on as sound an academic base as paediatrics and adult medicine.

A number of paediatricians have joined our ranks and our forum meetings are being publicised through the British Paediatric Association newsletter. We have planned a number of meetings this year in London and Glasgow with a possibility of others in Liverpool and other parts of the country. Subjects include "Adopting a teenager", "Abortion issues affecting the young, Why Alton is wrong", "HIV infection in teenagers", "Teenage suicide" (Professor Taylor), "Youthscan" (Professor Butler) and "Legal rights of teenagers". These are early days for our forum but hopefully in the future we will become as strong a professional body as SAM?* and who knows, we may even host an International meeting some day!

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