

PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE GROUP CONFERENCE

THE MENTAL HEALTH BILL

Only a change of heart among those at the top of the medical profession can remedy the "disgraceful lack of attention that is paid in the medical curriculum to the needs of mental health." This criticism was made by Mr. KENNETH ROBINSON, Labour M.P. for St. Pancras (North), when he addressed a conference in London on January 29 called by the B.M.A. Psychological Medicine Group. The conference had as its main business the discussion of the Mental Health Bill, which received its second reading in the House of Commons on January 26.* Dr. W. G. MASEFIELD (Eastbourne) was in the chair.

Serious Shortage of Psychiatrists

Among the problems confronting the implementation of the excellent proposals contained in the Bill was the most serious shortage of psychiatrists, said Mr. ROBINSON. The medical profession, in the widest sense, had a very grave responsibility for that shortage. It was quite disastrous that psychiatry should have been forced into a channel of its own which seemed to laymen to be divorced from the main stream of medicine. "So long as the medical teaching in this country is carried on on a basis that was acceptable 50 years ago we shall still fail to get anything like the psychiatrists that the sick people of this country need," he said. The facilities for undergraduate instruction in mental health he described as "deplorably limited." In all the country's teaching hospitals there were only 350 psychiatric beds, more than half of which were not in the parent hospital at all but in some rural establishment geographically and physically divorced from it.

The Bill itself he warmly welcomed as being on the right lines. His only serious criticism was that the Minister had not seen fit to make the local authority services mandatory.

The future of the nation's mental health services was a good deal brighter than anybody would have thought possible 10 years ago, he said. The improvement was mainly attributable to the entry of mental hospitals into the N.H.S., giving them access to central government finances. This had resulted in the upgrading of most of the inadequate, prison-like mental hospitals and the diffusion of psychotherapeutic techniques to give what had looked like a pretty static sort of service a new dynamism, helping public enlightenment and removing many fears and prejudices. As an outcome of the proposals of the Royal Commission set up to study the question of mental health and the law relating to it, the Bill disclosed very little dissension from the Commission's findings. He and his parliamentary colleagues who had been interested in the subject had been determined that the findings of this particular Royal Commission should not suffer the fate of so many others. It could be claimed that 18 months was not a bad time to elapse before a Royal Commission's recommendations were translated into a Bill before Parliament.

He welcomed the new enthusiasm for community services, but urged that, in deciding which patients should be treated within the community rather than as hospital in-patients, due regard should be paid to the needs of the family as well as to those of the patient; and that care should be taken, in the development of such community services, to avoid neglecting the equally urgent needs of the patients in mental hospitals.

Co-ordination with Local Authorities

Sir KEITH JOSEPH, Conservative M.P. for Leeds (North-east), said that correspondence he had received from the public had expressed concern about such matters as the

difficulty of persuading mentally sick people to go for treatment, the amount of discretion hospitals would exercise in refusing patients such as psychopaths so that there would have to be special institutions for them, and the general question of admission procedure. He also stressed the need to ensure that university staffs carrying out research in the mental health field should be properly supported with money. The question of making local authority powers mandatory was dependent on the availability of staff. An absolute prerequisite of success was co-ordination between local authorities and medical practitioners, which in some cases was grossly inadequate. The Ministry of Health might well follow the example of the Ministry of Education and set up an inspectorate for the co-ordination of health.

Dr. DUNCAN MACMILLAN (Nottingham) expressed the hope that some provision would be made for dealing with the small, intractable minority of psychopaths who would be the subject of court orders for admission to hospital. He and his colleagues were convinced of the absolute necessity for a joint service—the only way of bringing together all the factors so that the family and the community could be considered as well as the patient. He hoped that those engaged in public health would not regard the claims of those in the mental health sphere as encroachments on their territory. The field was so large that there would be a need for every resource on both sides.

Dr. A. H. WILSON (Leeds) urged that education authorities should be responsible for occupation centres. He, too, urged the setting up of a "mutual inspectorate to serve both the local authorities and the hospitals."

General Approval

A full discussion then took place upon the general implications of the Bill and the effect of individual clauses, the general tenor of which was, broadly speaking, strongly in favour of the new measures, although many of its detailed aspects were criticized.

Dr. J. A. R. BICKFORD (East Yorks) condemned the Bill as a whole on the ground that it sought to limit the liberty of the subject. "As a profession, I do not think we pay sufficient regard to freedom," he said. He objected to the proposal to set up a new category of psychopathic disorder—"persistent disorder of personality, with or without subnormality of intelligence, resulting in abnormally aggressive or seriously irresponsible conduct and requiring or susceptible to medical treatment"—because of the danger that "an unscrupulous local authority, anxious to be regarded as forward-looking and progressive, will then have a department of guardianship, and it will be thought very good if it is the first in the country to have a thousand people under it."

Summing up the discussion, Dr. T. P. REES, chairman of the Group Committee, warmly congratulated all concerned with the great progress made in the mental health field and the great steps forward which the Bill envisaged. He urged, however, that, in cases where a patient was sent by the Home Secretary to a mental hospital, the medical superintendent should have power to discharge that person when he considered it appropriate. The Home Secretary should not be allowed to use mental hospitals as accommodation because the prisons were overcrowded.

The fifteenth edition of Hey Groves's *A Synopsis of Surgery* (pp. 658, illustrated, John Wright and Sons Ltd., Bristol, 37s. 6d.), edited by Sir Cecil Wakeley, Bt., has been thoroughly revised to take account of advances in the four years since the previous edition. New material on vascular surgery and arterial grafting has been included, and the uses of the newer antibiotics in surgery are discussed. The present volume follows the course set by its predecessors and epitomizes the salient facts in surgical practice in a way that may be rapidly referred to. It is essentially a pre-examination guide. The editor has had the help of Mr. L. T. Cotton in the preparation of this new edition.

*See *Journal*, January 31, p. 309.