Occupationless Health

"What can be done?": responding to unemployment and health

RICHARD SMITH

The commonest response to my 10 published articles exploring how unemployment can damage physical, mental, and family health has been: "They are so sad, but what can we do." The answer is that much can be done—and at all levels. Many ideas have been advanced, many projects tried, and many programmes developed. These final articles will draw together these initiatives. I will start from "the top" and work down, hoping that those who feel that "nothing can be done" will be led to think again.

A role for everybody

Reducing unemployment is the obvious and best way of attacking the problem, and even this is not just for politicians and businessmen because organisations and individuals—including doctors—can take on new employees, either on their own initiative or through the various Manpower Services Commission programmes. In addition, the work that is available can be shared out more fairly, and this policy too can be pursued by individuals as well as governments. Then, although decently paid employment is what people want most, voluntary work is better than nothing. Health authorities and doctors know how much "work" needs to be done to help lonely, sick, and disabled people—and they should be able to put together those who need work and those who need help.

Other strategies try to reduce the harm done by unemployment, and one of the most potent ways of doing this is to reduce the poverty of those who have no job. Politicians (and doctors and other health workers) can argue for increased and better distributed benefits, but individuals can also work to increase the number who claim the benefits to which they are already entitled. Few people are better placed to do this than doctors. They can also point their unemployed patients towards the vast array of statutory and voluntary schemes that offer retraining, counselling, education, advice on leisure, ideas on job creation, practical help, companionship, and stimulation. The doctors can also offer themselves and their time, and, although they have no pills with which to treat unemployment, they can show that they understand and care. Such "treatment" might do much to ameliorate the apathy, pain, and humiliation of prolonged unemployment.

Doctors can also lead the way in reducing the stigma attached to unemployment. Too many of those in "comfortable" Britain have no understanding of what it is like to be unemployed and how difficult it is for those who have been without jobs for long periods to sustain their self esteem and find decent jobs. There is far too much talk of scroungers. Doctors must recognise that unemployment may strike almost anybody and damage their health, and they can help to bring home that fact to those lucky enough to have jobs. Mr Geoffrey Holland, the director of the Manpower Services Commission, said recently: "It has been the devil's own job to get people concerned about long term unemployment. There is warm individual and collective support for helping young people, but it is only in the last

CHARTER FOR JOBS

We believe that the present level of unemployment is economically wasteful and socially corrosive. The government can and must stimulate the creation of more jobs.

There is useful work crying out to be done. With extra spending we could renovate our cities and improve the health of our people, while lower taxes on jobs would raise private spending power and make us more competitive. To make this possible there has to be some increase in government borrowing. Government borrowing should normally rise in a depression. When there is useful work to be done, it is as sensible for the government to borrow money as for firms or families to do so.

The government has a special responsibility for the million and a quarter people who have been unemployed for over a year. These people should be guaranteed the offer of a job on socially useful projects, such as the Community Programme supports.

Formed last year to lobby the government to create new jobs, Charter for Jobs has representatives from all the main political parties and from industry, trade unions, finance, journalism, academia, the Church, and other groups.

year or so that the public has become aware of the problems of long term unemployment."¹

What is needed is a blueprint for action at every level, and already plans have been made. The European office of the World Health Organisation has a strategy for counteracting the health damage caused by unemployment,² although its book on targets for health in Europe by the year 2000 hardly mentions unemployment despite the first aim being to reduce inequalities in health by 25%.³ The health departments of various governments—including, for instance, the Swedish—have also adopted plans.⁴ (Unemployment in Sweden is around 3%. In Britain, where it is over 13%, far from producing a plan for reducing the ill health caused by unemployment, the Department of Health and Social Security has only recently, and grudgingly, accepted that unemployment has any effect on health.) The Association of Metropolitan Authorities has looked at the implications for the authorities in caring for the unemployed,⁵ and Strathclyde Regional Council has produced a report on the implications of unemployment for its regional services.⁶ Sadly no health authority has followed suit. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas has

made instantly controversial recommendations for improving the lot of those in the inner cities, many of which relate to unemployment.⁷ The Unemployment and Health Study Group has published a report on how health services and other agencies could modify the health consequences of unemployment.⁸ And some district medical officers and specialists in community medicine,⁹ health education departments,¹⁰ family practitioner committees,¹¹ individual general practices,^{12,13} and other small but energetic groups have also set to work to try to do something for the unemployed.

New jobs

The economically unsophisticated, which includes not only me and, I suspect, many doctors but also J B Priestley, cannot help but be struck by the contradiction of so much of Britain disintegrating about our ears at a time when so many people are unemployed. Priestley wrote in his *English Journey* in 1934: "I think I caught a glimpse then of what may seem to future historians one of the most dreadful ironies of this time of ours, when there were never more men doing nothing and there was never so much to be done."¹⁴ Such ironies can be seen now very clearly in the National Health Service: many of the buildings are in a poor state of repair; waiting lists are still absurdly long; and, most important of all, many families and individuals must bear alone what can be almost impossible burdens of looking after handicapped and elderly relatives. Skilled help is of course needed to reduce waiting lists, but much of the work that cries out to be done in Britain needs only minimal skills.

Despite that, as Williams argues strongly, many of the new jobs that might be created in Britain will need considerable skills.¹⁵ Colombo has studied where new jobs might come from in Italy, concluding that most will come from three main endeavours: new technologies and their applications; improvement of the environment and infrastructure; and human services (table I).¹⁶ He predicts that almost two million new jobs will be created by new technology, and many of these will be highly skilled.

In one of its three models which assumes a rapid growth in new technology, a similar but more detailed study undertaken for the United States also predicts a huge expansion in jobs for professionally qualified people—perhaps by as much as 14 million by the year 2000.¹⁷ At the same time there would be a modest increase in maintenance workers and a dramatic fall in clerical workers. These

predictions assume that education and training can keep up and supply workers with the necessary skills; if they can't then increased structural unemployment will be the result (19 October, p 1107). Sadly, a report prepared jointly by the National and Economic Development Office and the Manpower Services Commission in May 1984 concluded that vocational education and training in Britain were deficient compared with that available in its three main competitors—the United States, Japan, and West Germany.¹⁸ British companies spend only 0.15% of their turnover on training compared with 1.2% in other countries.¹⁹

These patterns of expansion in jobs are not all prediction because they have happened to a large extent in the United States and to a much smaller extent in Britain (table II).^{15,20} In the United States between 1972 and 1982 a million jobs were lost in manufacturing industry, while the labour force increased by 23 million men and women. Unemployment did not rocket, although it did increase,

Unemployed young people reclaim land to be used as allotments on a scheme set up by Haringey Council (picture by S O'Meara, copyright BBC Hulton Picture Library).

because 17 million new jobs were created—mostly in the white collar sector. Over 5 million jobs were created in professional and technical occupations and 3.5 million in management and executive posts: these included 200 000 more doctors, 300 000 more computer specialists, 250 000 more lawyers, 500 000 technicians, and 150 000 social scientists. In addition, 1.3 million jobs were created in medical services at a lower level. In Britain the only sections that produced new jobs between 1979 and 1983 were health (291 000), education (120 000), business services (106 000), banking and finance (150 000), and catering (55 000). The message is thus that new jobs can appear but the conditions have to be right, and in Britain they may not be right. A very recent report from the Labour Research Group describes how the sun may already be setting on Britain's "sunrise" industries: "Far from guaranteeing jobs and prosperity to offset the decline of other industries, the electronics industry in Britain is facing its own deep crisis."²¹

Political measures to create jobs

How much the government can do to create the right conditions and new jobs is a moot point. The present British government argues that it is not for it to increase jobs but rather to create an environment in which businesses can produce new jobs. Others argue that the government could do more and yet don't chose to make reducing unemployment a priority. The evidence that

TABLE I—Predictions on where new jobs will come from in Italy (Colombo)

New technologies and their applications		The environment and the infrastructure		Human services	
	000's		000's		000's
Robot technicians	200	Energy technicians	2-300	Medical technicians	150
New materials	200	Housing		Geriatric social	
Biotechnologists	200	rehabilitation	150	workers	100
Computer aided design/		Hazardous waste	100	Childcare	150
computer aided		Industrial		Leisure	
graphics	100	conservation	150		
Computer aided		Land rehabilitation	40		
manufacturing	100				
Computer technology	450				
Testing techniques	100				
New manufacturing	300				
Office automation	300				
Total	1950	Total	640-740	Total	450

TABLE II—Job gains and losses in Britain between June 1984 and June 1985

Sector	Numerical change (June 1984 to June 1985)	% change
Services:		
Banking, finance, insurance	+79 000	+4.3
Retail distribution	+57 000	+2.7
Hotels, catering	+41 000	+4.1
Other services (public, personnel)	+24 000	+1.8
Wholesale distribution	+23 000	+2.0
Medical, other health services	+22 000	+1.7
Transport	-19 000	-2.2
Manufacturing:		
Paper, paper production, printing, publishing	+5 000	+1.0
Mechanical engineering	+3 000	+0.4
Office machines, electrical engineering, and instruments	+2 000	+0.2
Metal goods (miscellaneous)	+2 000	+0.5
Motor vehicles, parts	-9 000	-3.1
Timber, wooden furniture	-10 000	-2.2
Textiles, leather footwear, clothing	-11 000	-2.1
Other transport equipment	-13 000	-4.4
Construction	-34 000	-3.5
Coal, oil, etc	-17 000	-5.9
Electricity, gas, water	-6 000	-1.8
Agriculture	-2 000	-0.5

unemployment harms health thus takes on great importance because the harder it becomes the more difficulty the government will experience in making reducing unemployment a lower priority than reducing inflation. Williams has written: "Economic ideology has been adhered to in Britain . . . without any consciousness of the cost unemployment levies in human self respect. Perhaps there will not be enough work by the end of the century to provide everyone with a full time job, in which case hours will have to be cut and work shared out. But we are nowhere near running out of work in the mid-1980s. It is the political will to make employment the top domestic priority that is lacking."¹⁵

As a response to this kind of thinking a group called Charter for Jobs was formed last year to lobby the government to create new jobs.²² It has representatives from all the major political parties and from industry, trade unions, finance, journalism, academia, the Church, and other groups. Its charter is shown in the box, but its proposals for increasing employment include: a substantial rise in public infrastructure investment with an emphasis on labour intensive projects, which might include building the cross channel link except that it is not very labour intensive; a cut in employer's national insurance contributions to reduce the cost of labour (without reducing wages); and a form of job guarantee for the 1.25 million long term unemployed on projects such as those provided by the community programme.

This last proposal will particularly interest those concerned about the health of the unemployed because it is the long term unemployed and their families who suffer the most: any initiative to help them will do the most to reduce the overall harm to health. (Programmes to help them are also, as the government recognises, the ones least likely to fuel inflation.) The charter wants these long term unemployed to be offered work on socially useful projects on which they would gain work experience and be paid an hourly rate. It calculates that for an investment of £1 billion the government could provide half a million jobs, while if the money was spent in more traditional ways it would create only 100 000.

The Trades Union Congress wants to see job creation through public investment of more than £7.5 billion over the next five years: £3 billion would be spent on housing, roads, schools, and hospitals; £900m on expanding research and development, spreading technology, and boosting exports; and £2010m on education and the National Health Service.²³

The *Economist* has just published "a menu for the jobless" that overlaps to some extent with the ideas of the Charter for Jobs.²⁴ It advocates: reducing the cost of employing the least employable by cutting national insurance contributions of employers (and perhaps employees) in the hardest hit areas and perhaps for those under 25; targetting spending on those longest out of work by creating public works in inner cities and adopting labour intensity as a main criterion (as the *Economist* says, "nothing mops up unskilled, middle aged, unemployed men like building"); and putting more effort into making areas of high unemployment attractive places in which to live and work.

The Church of England and the Confederation of British Industry are also enthusiastic about creating jobs by spending public money on building and repairing.⁷ The Church, too, argues for more expenditure on public services, including the National Health Service. It is upset by talk of "proper jobs" (those that are supposed to create wealth as opposed to those that simply employ people doing useful service work) and says in its report *Faith in the City*: "We must confront the implications for society of a belief that the manufacture of rubber ducks for export increases economic welfare, but job creating public expenditure on environmental improvement or caring for the elderly does not."

Perhaps these plans would work and perhaps they wouldn't. Or maybe much more radical plans should be adopted. The crucial point is, however, that much more could be done to increase employment—it could be made a priority. Those who have gained some insight into the agonies of unemployment must surely think, as I do, that more needs be done to create employment.

Subsequent articles will consider other ways of helping the unemployed.

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