UK community groups reject mental health reforms

Gavin Yamey *BMJ*

The government's green paper on reform of the 1983 Mental Health Act has been widely condemned by those who use mental health services, policymakers, and politicians, despite receiving guarded support from the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The paper proposes instituting a new process for ordering compulsory care and treatment and extending the use of compulsory orders into the community. An initial assessment process performed by two health professionals would last for seven days, and this could lead to an application to an independent reviewer for a 21 day "provisional order." If further compulsory treatment is proposed then cases must be submitted to a new mental disorder tribunal.

The tribunal would be able to order compulsory treatment in hospital or the community. The report states: "We want the new Mental Health Act to bridge the

gulf between the full compulsory treatment and detention powers, that are provided under the 1983 act, and the comparatively weak and ineffective powers that it provides for care and supervision outside hospital."

The health secretary, Alan Milburn, said: "The current mental health laws have failed. They have failed to properly protect the public, patients, or staff. The tragic toll of suicides and homicides graphically illustrates the failure."

But the proposals have angered many organisations including the charities Mind and the Mental Health Foundation, and the Royal College of Nursing; many of these have formed an alliance to oppose the community treatment orders. The alliance feels that the link between mental illness and violence has been overstated (20 November, p 1322), and it notes that the government's own inquiry into homicides and suicides found that treatment orders would have only a small effect on homicide rates.

The King's Fund believes that compulsory treatment is irrelevant to most people with mental illness. Rabbi Julia Neuberger, chief executive of the fund, said: "Choice, not compulsion, is the key to effective mental health

New compulsory orders for patients with mental illness have been condemned

care. Community care should help people with mental illnesses to live ordinary lives, not contain and control them."

The Royal College of Psychiatrists, which gave evidence to the committee advising the government on reform, welcomed the green paper but expressed concern over community treatment orders: "The college would not support the notion of forcibly treating people against their will in their own homes." □

Safer Services: National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness, can be found at <http://tap.ccta.gov.uk/doh/point.nsf>.

EU makes mental illness top priority

Rory Watson *Brussels*

Tackling mental illnesses will be one of the European Union's priorities when it draws up its new multiannual public health programme early next year.

The decision to focus more EU attention on mental health questions was taken by European health ministers last week, largely on the insistence of the Finnish government, which currently holds the rotating, six month EU presidency. Welcoming the move, the Finnish social affairs minister, Eva Biaudet, said: "I am glad this has been agreed, as some people think it is a taboo subject. But there is no health without mental health." Now that the principle has been established—and the Portuguese, who take over the EU presidency from the Finns in January, also consider this to be a public health priority—there will be pressure on the European Union to devise practical measures to support national efforts to cope with mental illnesses.

Health ministers have already pointed to the need to collect and disseminate quality data on mental health, to exchange examples of good practice, and to promote joint projects between different national medical authorities.

The European Commission itself has been asked to establish a mental health monitoring system, designed to examine trends in the union and to produce a report on the subject. In addition, it will analyse the impact on mental health of EU policies such as education, youth, social affairs, and employment. The public health commissioner, David Byrne, made clear his priorities last week when he expressed his "concern at the incidence of mental health problems in children and adolescents and at suicides among children, especially teenage boys, where they are on the increase." □

Publishers to link science journals on line

Deborah Josefson *New York*

In an effort to streamline access to medical and scientific research, 12 publishers of leading scientific journals have announced a collaborative effort to link their publications on line.

The cooperative agreement will ally publishing houses that have historically been rivals such as Oxford University Press, Elsevier Science, Blackwell Science, Springer, John Wiley, and Macmillan. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the American Institute of Physics, Kluwer Academic Publishers, and the Association for Computing Machinery will also participate.

The agreement was driven by the need for researchers to be

able to access data efficiently across a number of journals—a feat which was a laborious process before the advent of the internet and which even now is difficult as most journals are not linked to each other on line.

The online links will allow researchers to move easily from a reference in one journal article to the content of the article that is being cited. The article that is being cited is often located on a different server and published by a different publisher, which may impede a researcher's access.

Unless researchers have a subscription to the journal being cited or access to a library that does, they are currently unable to read the articles cited. The new agreement will allow automatic linkage at the click of a mouse.

The reference links will be provided free and the service will be run as a non-profit entity, but the extent of the information provided, such as the article's abstract or full text, will be determined by individual publishers. They may also impose a fee for viewing or delivering the article.

The reference linking service will be run from a central facility and administered by an elected board. It will contain a limited set of data: the journals' contents and links will also remain at each individual publisher's site.

The new service will enable researchers to access data rapidly, thereby speeding the pace of medical research. The internet is already transforming the way information is relayed and accessed, and academics are increasingly relying on it for their research.

The service, which is to become available in early 2000, will initially link three million articles and will add another 500 000 each year. □