British Journal of Psychiatry (1988), **152,** 869–870

Reading about . . .

Mental Handicap: Update

Fifty years ago there was a dearth of reliable literature about mental handicap. Today there is an embarrassment of riches in this field. For the psychiatrist aiming to acquire special expertise in dealing with mental handicap, the text edited by Craft *et al* (1985) can be heartily recommended. Whereas the precise arrangement of work varies greatly from one area to another, the clinical psychiatrist in mental handicap will inevitably find himself a member of a team, and he will need to know something of the professional resources which can be provided by his colleagues. It is therefore appropriate that the book edited by Craft *et al* should be multi-disciplinary. Although this may be the legitimate successor to Tredgold's classic text (Tredgold, 1908), it reflects a completely new approach with emphasis on the social and community needs of those with limited intellectual capacity.

Penrose's classical Colchester survey (Penrose, 1938) and subsequent editions of his textbook on mental handicap revolutionised the study of the subject, putting it on a sound scientific basis of human biology. It was logical, therefore, that he should have been the foundation editor of the *Journal of Mental Deficiency Research,* which is now celebrating its 30th birthday. The past numbers of this journal are a treasury of information about the nature of mental handicap, from aetiology and epidemiology to psychology and social adaptation. For example, Oliver *et al* (1987) report on self-injurious behaviour in people with mental handicap while Nursey *et al* (1986) discuss the use of a mental handicap register and Day (1987) reports on the elderly mentally handicapped in hospital.

Another treasure trove of reliable information is the series of annuals edited by Professor Joseph Wortis since 1970, in which the whole range of the subject is discussed. It is fitting that a recent editorial in this series should have been a tribute to Professor Jack Tizard, whose work was so catalytic in reshaping our aspirations for the rehabilitation of the retarded and for their integration into society (Wortis, 1986) The same volume contains a thought-provoking chapter on some ethical problems in regard to the mentally handicapped: the practice of depriving a malformed infant of nutrition and treatment so that it dies; the provision of appropriate educational facilities for the handicapped; and the use of mentally handicapped populations for research which is of no benefit to them and may even be harmful (Blatt & Biklen, 1986).

The volumes published after the successive congresses of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency are rich sources of information. For example, the fifth congress was followed by the issue of two volumes under the general heading of *Frontiers of Knowledge in Mental Retardation,* subdivided into social, educational and behavioural, and biomedical aspects (Mittler, 1980). Among many other matters discussed in these volumes are the prevention of Down's syndrome (Kline *et al*) and "the problems of mental subnormality in a developing country" (Paul).

More valuable information about mental handicap resulted from a workshop held on Staten Island (Wisniewski & Snider, 1986). This volume includes, among many other things, a full account of the fragile X syndrome, which is now recognised to be common and second only to Down's syndrome as a cause of mental retardation in males. A report by Brown *et al* casts some doubt on the value of the ingenious suggestion made by Lejeune of prophylactic treatment of women pregnant with a fragile X child, by supplements of folic acid. This volume also contains a topical report by Pytkowicz Streissguth *et al,* who subscribe to the now generally-held view that there is a common syndrome recognisable on morphological grounds, due to maternal consumption of alcohol. They provide illustrations of typical cases, while admitting that other environmental and also genetic factors may produce a similar picture. Snider contributes a useful chapter dealing with 'technology transfer', pointing out that in contrast to the rapid spread of techniques in diagnosis and prevention of mental retardation, techniques of treatment, such as behaviour shaping, have spread only slowly.

Another rich source of information for reading and reference on mental retardation is the report of a three-day conference at Oxford, organised by the Royal Society of Medicine (Dobbing, 1984). This

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.152.6.869 Published online by Cambridge University Press

report is multi-disciplinary and, as well as having a section on biomedical aspects, also covers research into psychosocial problems and service provision. Of particular interest to psychiatrists is a chapter by Corbett on psychiatry and mental retardation.

Among the many symposia on mental handicap, the one edited by Lane & Stratford (1985) on Down's syndrome can be strongly recommended. Down's syndrome accounts for one-third of all cases of the more severe degrees of mental handicap, and an account of recent developments on aetiology, prevention, and management is valuable for any psychiatrist advising people with this syndrome and their families. The symposium is again multi-disciplinary, the editors being respectively professors of sociology and of special education. The parents' view is represented by Rex Brinkworth, a founder of the Down's Children's Association, and emphasises the continuing need for better community care as opposed to that provided by the overcrowded, understaffed institution.

The family of the mentally handicapped child will expect comprehensive advice from the psychiatrist or the other members of his team. Ideally, for example, there should be a close link with a paediatrician and a clinical geneticist. But in practice there are many gaps in the team, and the psychiatrist may be called on to fill some of these and should have basic knowledge of all the facets of his subject. On genetics I have found Zellweger & Simpson (1977) informative. McKusick's monumental catalogues (1978) have been invaluable, and contain much relevant to mental handicap. In this rapidly developing field, however, it is necessary to keep in touch through specialist journals or other publications and the occasional article in the general medical press. For example, an obstetric study (Alberman & Dennis, 1984) found that a significant minority of very late abortions were occasioned by delay in diagnosis of congenital anomaly. Attention is now focused on chorionic villi sampling for early diagnosis. Leschot *et al* (1987) reported favourably on this technique.

Understanding child development is basic to a study of mental handicap. Those new to the field can be recommended to read the appropriate sections of the texts on child psychiatry, e.g. Rutter & Hersov (1985), Graham (1986).

Ethical issues in mental handicap continue to attract considerable publicity, and are especially important for the psychiatrist. A thought-provoking symposium edited by Laura & Ashman (1985) is a useful starting point for consideration of the many unresolved problems in this difficult field.

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https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.152.6.869 Published online by Cambridge University Press