British Journal of Psychiatry (1995), **167** (suppl. 28), 5–6

Foreword

JOHN H. HENDERSON

In the early 1980s the adverse conditions of the state mental hospitals in Greece became public knowledge in Greece itself and also to a wider, international public. A report, commissioned in 1981 by the government of Greece from an international mental health expert, provided a searing indictment of intolerable conditions in these hospitals and a further critical comment that, while some medical specialties in Greece were then abreast of the times, psychiatry in Greece was outdated by many decades.

This perceptive and seminal report on the impoverished conditions for the care and treatment of the mentally ill in Greece, and especially those with longer-term illnesses and disabilities, did make evident the fact that in Greece a tradition of neuropsychiatry had perpetuated long after a separation of these specialties had taken place in most European countries. Also given emphasis in this report was one other important factor which contributed to the delay in reform of the cruel institutionalisation and outdated care. This was the preponderance of patients with mental retardation retained among the predominantly long-stay patient population of the mental hospitals.

By 1984 national initiatives for reform of the psychiatric services and of the state hospitals for the mentally ill had begun and received considerable support and encouragement from the European Commission when, under Council Regulation EEC 815/84, Greece was provided with exceptional financial support for the reform of centres for mentally ill and mentally handicapped people in Greece.

A team of experts, national and international in membership, was established by the Commission, at the request of the Greek authorities. It was soon evident to this team that the state mental hospital on the island of Leros in the Aegean Sea presented special and extremely challenging problems. It was obvious to all that radical reform was necessary in this location in order to bring into being the most basic of human standards of care, treatment and rehabilitation for a very large number of disabled and handicapped patients, many of whom were suffering primarily from mental handicap.

However, it was not until 1987, when an international meeting on rehabilitation in psychiatry was held on the island, that the wholly degrading and inhuman conditions in which the population of the children's hospital run by PIKPA, Greece's largest child welfare organisation, were living became fully exposed to the glare of international publicity and opprobrium. No one who visited the PIKPA institution at that time could ever forget the appalling physical and social living conditions which over 160 so-called children and the staff had to endure. Most of these children had grown to adolescence or adulthood during their years of incarceration. Nor will anyone who saw them ever forget the tragic sight of naked boys and girls crawling about or lying on dirty coarse blankets spread upon the bare floors of their wards, or those who were terribly deformed and misshapen lying so still in their beds as to appear lifeless.

This supplement deals only with the PIKPA asylum and the special project which was established after European Council Regulation 815/84 was extended and amended in December 1988. Following this extension the Commission decided to establish a permanent team of independent international experts whose task was to monitor and evaluate the outcome of the reform programme and its many projects. There is no doubt that the PIKPA project held a place of special attention and concern for members of the team and for the Commission. It is therefore gratifying in the extreme to have such a detailed written account of the project and its outcome. The reader will be well rewarded not only with the professionalism of the project but also with the common sense and humanity which so evidently pervaded the work of the intervention team.

Professor Tsiantis and his colleagues have endured the travails of exploration and innovation in their search for the means, professional and humanitarian, to overcome the constraints of bureaucracy, the ignorance, the fears and the bigotry of staff and the public of the island. Not least, the call on their professional skills and knowledge has been far greater during the relatively short life of the project than they may have expected in a working lifetime in more propitious circumstances or surroundings.

The importance of this record of the achievement of change is not only as a learned account of the project in its own right but as an experience worthy of replication in similar institutions in Greece and in a number of other countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125000298152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There are many lessons to be learned from the factual and scientific account of the planning, targeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the project, and there are equally important lessons to be learned from the carefully planned and detailed study over time of the changes in attitude of care staff at the institution. Too often the influences of covert and overt resistance to change of staff are overlooked or neglected. Here is a window of experience from which much can be learned for transfer and application elsewhere.

While the study of mortality in the PIKPA asylum does contribute to our knowledge, it also poses questions of policy development for those countries yet to plunge whole-heartedly into community care as an alternative to traditional institutional care. Further, and perhaps even more important, ethical questions are hinted at and deserve thoughtful consideration and discussion on a wider platform than the single institutional model of PIKPA. Planners, politicians, professionals and carers with responsibilities and concerns for multiply handicapped people will ignore the implications of this study at their peril and at possible great cost to those with such needs in the next decade or two.

In the beginning it was simple for those giving advice to the authorities in Greece to recommend that the answer to the Leros problem was to transfer back to the mainland the residents of the state mental hospital and those in the PIKPA asylum. However, the planning of the PIKPA project during 1990 resulted in a well staged strategy for change. This plan was brought into operation in February 1991 and continued with extensions until December 1994.

The reality of the circumstances prevailing on the island and in the PIKPA institution have been so thoroughly revealed and dealt with in this report of the project that it sets a challenge as well as an example to others who will follow the path of reform of the care and treatment of those with longer-term mental disabilities and handicaps in other countries in Europe and throughout the world.

The report also brings into focus the pertinent issue of the role of psychiatry in the area of care and treatment of those with mental handicap. While the report will not conclude this debate, it will certainly add substance for those who wish to continue to pursue the importance of these matters in professional fields other than psychiatry, for example in psychology, social work and elsewhere.

Early in 1994 the PIKPA asylum was integrated with the state mental hospital and has been subject to a massive rebuilding and redevelopment programme. The conversions will provide the resident patients with comfortable and convenient accommodation. For those patients with physical disabilities and mobility problems the installation of a lift (the only one on the island), spacious bathrooms and wide corridors, together with mobility aids, will make a remarkable difference to their wellbeing. A small residential hostel on site has also been completed and is ideal for the preparation of patients for independent or sheltered living conditions in the community.

The institution has been repaired and rehabilitated; some of the residents have been rehabilitated, and others are making good progress. Nevertheless, the fact is that a generation of patients of PIKPA asylum will continue to live in an institutional setting, albeit in humane and agreeable surroundings. The intervention project itself, though never achieving the ambitions of the early reform programme and the wishes of its protagonists, has shown the way forward for a new and much better life for those remaining in the hospital and for the rehabilitation of those with a potential for return to the community. Could we really expect more?

John H. Henderson, Director, EC Independent Team of Experts

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125000298152 Published online by Cambridge University Press