PUBLIC POLICY COMMITTEE

Memorandum on Information to the Police

As the result of a complaint by a Police Force that in one particular instance they had not received from the staff of a psychiatric hospital that co-operation which they expected in the investigation of serious crime, the Public Policy Committee has examined the general principles involved and has further discussed this matter with the professional defence organizations. The following notes are the outcome of these discussions and are offered as guidelines:

1. The decision to offer or to give information to the Police is a matter for individual clinical and ethical judgement. Clinical problems and judgement concerning them varies from case to case and perhaps from consultant to consultant, who should in any difficulty whatsoever seek the advice of a professional defence organization.
2. No difficulty, of course, arises when doctors are acting in the interests and with the consent of the patient concerned. It is when these circumstances do not obtain that difficulty may arise.
3. This is particularly so where a matter of serious crime is under consideration. The Department of Health and Social Security, and doubtless individual consultants, are anxious that no obstruction should be placed in the way of the police in the investigation of serious crime. The Public Policy Committee appreciated that there could be considerable variation and scope in the definition of the term 'serious crime', but it is clear that circumstances could be visualized in which the crime was so serious and the danger or risk to innocent third parties so great that the consultant might feel it his or her clear duty to make a deliberate breach of the ordinary rule not to disclose his patient's confidence without consent. In certain circumstances it could be argued that risk or danger to which people might be exposed might include the patient himself.
4. It should also be noted that an exception to the general rule on professional confidence has been recommended by the Department of Health and Social Security and concerns the discharge from psychiatric hospitals of patients who are potentially violent or dangerous. It is thought that the discharge of such patients can and should be notified to the Police—the information provided being concerned only with the identification of the patient and the discharge date, the possibility of further violence and the possibility of response to further treatment.
5. It was considered by the Public Policy Committee that a psychiatrist should not respond to a 'blanket' inquiry, i.e. a police request for the names and addresses of certain categories of patients, e.g. male patients between the ages of 18 and 35 years out on leave between certain dates. It is a totally different matter and one again for individual judgement when the police make a specific request about a specific patient for a specific reason which is not concealed from the psychiatrist concerned.
6. The College will ask the Department of Health and Social Security to advise hospital administrators not to divulge information of the type referred to in the previous paragraph about individual patients or groups of patients without consultation with the clinicians concerned.
7. It should again be stressed that in case of any doubt whatsoever the consultant should seek the advice of his or her professional defence organization.

GASKELL MEDAL AND PRIZE, 1976

The Gaskell Medal and Prize for 1976 has been awarded to Dr George Alexander Roy, M.R.C.Psych., Registrar at the Maudsley Hospital, London.

BRONZE MEDAL AND PRIZE, 1976

The Bronze Medal and Prize for 1976 has been awarded to Dr Robin McGregor Murray, M.R.C. Psych., Registrar at The Maudsley Hospital, London.

COLLEGE TIE

The College now has its own necktie. This is dark blue with the College motif in yellow and white, and is manufactured to a high standard in polyester Crimplene. It is available to members at a cost of £2.50, plus 12p for postage and packing, and orders should be sent to the Royal College of Psychiatrists 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG, together with a cheque for the appropriate amount.

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