1. Statistical prediction of the outcome of treatment of depressive illness

2. Classification of depressive states based on clinical and biochemical measurements

3. Setting up of a Token Economy Unit in a long-stay hospital

4. The metabolic effects of lithium therapy in manic-depressive psychosis

5. Application of statistical methods to problems of classification of illness

6. Psychophysiology

7. Use of objective assessment in medical education

8. The relationship of school and the child's environment

9. The use made by the courts of the psychiatric services

RESEARCH BODIES

The Mental Health Research Fund, which was founded in 1949, began making grants on a substantial scale in 1955. During the last few years its Research Committee, consisting of twenty members chosen from a wide range of disciplines, including neuro-anatomy and sociology as well as clinical psychiatry, biochemistry and psychology, has been able to allocate around £50,000–£80,000 per year in research support.

Once a year the Fund appoints a number of full-time Research Fellows, on salary scales ranging from £1,500 to £4,000 per annum according to seniority and experience, for periods of from 1 to 5 years. Four to six times a year the Research Committee allocates money to research projects, paying for graduate and technical assistance, equipment and expenses. These grants vary, but seldom exceed £5,000 spread over 3 years. Applications are always sent to at least two referees for comment and then the priorities decided by the Research Committee; at present the Fund receives more good applications than it has money to support so the situation is a competitive one.

As the membership of the Committee indicates, the Fund has a very wide range of interest, both in project and Fellowship support. Recent awards, for example, are: Fellowships for an investigation of the effects of filmed material on young people's behaviour and a study of mother-infant interaction, and grants for the study of psychogenic amenorrhoea, brain cystalthionine synthetase, socio-cultural factors in the outcome of depressive illness, perceptual function in schizophrenia, and the mode of action of an anti-depressant drug.

Besides this, the Fund seeks to encourage by all means the entry of gifted students into the fields of psychiatry and psychiatric research, and to lend what weight it can to getting this Cinderella subject to an admittedly decreasingly sumptuous Ball. The Fund awards annually monetary prizes and one Travelling Fellowship to medical students and doctors in their pre-registration year as a result of a set essay competition followed by interview. The Fellowship gives a year for postgraduate study abroad. There are also monetary prizes given for competitions for registrars in Regional Hospital Board hospitals, Social Workers and Nurses and Psychologists. The Fund has sponsored three books and published 7 pamphlets for the layman, describing simply the main features of schizophrenia, depression and other subjects.

J. M. Tanner

Enquiries regarding research work should be addressed to the Hon. Secretary, Mental Health Research Fund, 38 Wigmore Street, W1H 9DF. Full lists of projects supported and publications resulting are available in the Annual Report issued by the Director of the Mental Health Research Fund.

1971 Registrars' Essay Prizes

The Mental Health Research Fund has pleasure in announcing that the prizes for the best essays on some aspect of psychiatric research, in the competition open to those below the rank of Consultant, have been awarded to:

£125: Dr. J. P. R. Young, The Bethlem Royal and the Maudsley Hospital. Title: 'An Investigation of the Influence of Heredity on the EEG and Certain Personality Traits.'

£125: Dr. T. W. Harding, Department of Psychiatry, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh. Title: 'Serum Creatine Kinase in Acute Psychosis (With Special Reference to Lysergic Acid Di-ethylamide).'

Medical Research Council

The M.R.C. Annual Report (1970–71) describes certain developments in the field of psychiatry and psychology which were supported by the Council.

Metabolic disorders and mental retardation: Current work by the Council's Membrane Biology Research Group (Director: Dr. A. N. Davidson) suggests that it is the presence of abnormally high levels of phenylalanine preventing the passage of certain essential aminoacids from the blood to the brain that is responsible for phenylketonuria. The consequent interference with the process of protein biosynthesis could inhibit the formation of crucial structures such as synapses or myelin sheaths.

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125071309882 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cognitive development of handicapped children: Experiments at the M.R.C. Developmental Psychology Unit (Director: Dr. N. O'Connor) showed that autistic children are unable to organize sequences of auditory or visual information into a meaningful pattern. The social and emotional withdrawal of autistic children may be a result of such cognitive deficit.

Biochemical factors in psychiatric disorders: In a controlled trial of the prophylactic effects of lithium in manic-depressive psychosis, Dr. R. P. Hullin at Leeds found a significant reduction in the frequency of psychotic episodes in over 70% of a group of 90 patients. A further finding was that continuous lithium treatment produced inhibition of thyroxine synthesis, a finding which may explain the increased thyroid pathology found in patients receiving lithium.

Psychiatric registers: A register covering all patients referred to the psychiatric services in Aberdeen and North-East Scotland set up in 1963 by the Department of Mental Health in the University of Aberdeen has been analysed at the M.R.C. Clinical Psychiatry Unit (Director: Dr. P. Sainsbury). One finding confirmed was that early death of a parent is an important causative factor in mental illness, particularly in its more severe forms. Moreover, the presence of an elder brother or sister of the same sex as the lost parent tends to diminish the effects of the early death of a parent on the younger children but to increase them for the older brother or sister.

Suicide: Work supported by the Council over the past four years on suicide and attempted suicide, which has been mainly carried out at the Clinical Psychiatry Unit and the Unit of Epidemiological Studies in Psychiatry (Honorary Director: Professor G. M. Carstairs), is reviewed. The principal aims of the units are firstly to describe the clinical, personal and social characteristics of suicidal individuals, so that those who run the greatest risk of suicide may be recognized, and secondly, to evaluate and improve present preventive measures. Further work will be aimed at identifying those persons most likely to kill themselves in their suicide attempts—in other words those who genuinely intend to kill themselves rather than to appeal for help in some critical personal situation. Comparisons with depressed patients who do not have suicidal ideas are also planned.

A survey of attempted suicides in Camberwell, undertaken at the Council's Social Psychiatry Unit (Director: Professor J. K. Wing) showed that those who subsequently repeated their attempts at suicide had had fewer contacts with community services than those who did not. This suggests that further expansion of community services will help to reduce suicide rates. The critical problem, however, is still how to identify those people in need of specialized care. One important step in this direction, with which the Clinical Psychiatry Unit is closely involved, is the organization of courses to assist general practitioners in the recognition and management of suicidal and depressed patients.

Appointment

The Medical Research Council have appointed Dr. N. B. Kreitman M.D., D.P.M., as Director of their Unit for Epidemiological Studies in Psychiatry in the University Department of Psychiatry, Royal Edinburgh Hospital. He succeeds Professor G. M. Carstairs, who has relinquished the honorary directorship of this Unit owing to the pressure of his department and other commitments.

PATIENTS IN PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS AND UNITS: 1969 STATISTICS

A report* published recently provides a wide range of statistics relating to patients of psychiatric hospitals and units in England and Wales for 1969. Previous reports covering the years 1964 to 1968 were published in 1969 and 1970. The main part of the report follows similar lines to that for 1968 but additionally separate figures for England as well as for England and Wales are shown.

The trend established in previous reports, which showed increasing numbers of admissions to mental illness hospitals and units but reducing numbers in hospital at any one time, continued in 1969. In hospitals and units for the mentally handicapped the gradual rise in admissions since 1965 was reversed in 1969. This and the previous report also show that the number of patients in hospitals and units for the mentally handicapped fell slightly between 1968 and 1969.

The report includes an article entitled, 'Changes in the number of patients in mental illness hospitals in England and Wales over the period 1954 to 1969'. The marked decline in the number of in-patients at any one time from 152,000 in 1954 to 116,000 in 1969 is discussed in some detail. This decline in numbers is evidenced at all ages except under the age of 15 and at age 75 and over. The increase in those under 15 years of age may perhaps be attributed to the increased number of beds provided for the treatment of mentally ill and seriously maladjusted children, while the increase in the number of patients aged 75

* Psychiatric Hospitals and Units in England and Wales. In-patient statistics from the Mental Health Enquiry for the year 1969, Statistical Report Serics No. 12. Department of Health and Social Security.

https://doi.org/10.1192/S0007125071309882 Published online by Cambridge University Press