British Journal of Psychiatry (1993), **162**, 576–579

Reading About . . .

Epidemiological Psychiatry

In 1881 J. M. Machado de Assis published a short novel entitled *The Psychiatrist*. The main character, Simao Bacamarte, "a physician of noble birth", devoted himself to "the health of the soul" (as he defined psychopathology) and conceived a new, revolutionary (for the times) hypothesis: "The number of persons suffering from insanity, he believed, was far greater than commonly supposed". Dr Bacamarte explains: "Till now, madness has been thought a small island in an ocean of sanity. I am beginning to suspect that it is not an island at all but a continent".

Some 80 years later Dr Bacamarte's hypothesis was put to the test by Michael Shepherd in a series of studies designed to estimate the extent of psychiatric illness in general practice. His findings supported Dr Bacamarte's opinion: "What was originally expected to be a small island of psychiatric morbidity has, then, turned out to be a large uncharted continent" (Shepherd *et al*, 1966; Shepherd & Clare, 1981).

Psychiatric Illness in General Practice (Shepherd *et al*, 1966) describes a large-scale survey carried out in 12 general practices in Greater London between 1961 and 1962. The authors demonstrated, for the first time, that the vast bulk of psychiatric disorders were identified and treated by general practitioners (GPs) and not by mental health specialists. There were five main conclusions.

(a) Psychiatric morbidity was one of the commoner reasons for consulting a GP. About 14% of the population at risk consulted their family doctor at least once over a 12-month period for a complaint diagnosed as entirely or largely psychiatric.

(b) Conditions given a psychiatric diagnosis made up about two-thirds of all psychiatric morbidity. The majority of patients identified in the survey were suffering from psychiatric disorders diagnosed by the general practitioner as neurotic conditions. By contrast, psychoses accounted for less than 5% of the total. Although mostly minor in nature, these psychiatric disorders tended to present a long-lasting and disabling course. In over half of the patients, psychiatric illness was continuously present for at least one year, or recurred with sufficient frequency to cause continuous disability or to require continuous prophylactic treatment.

(c) Medical and social factors were strongly linked with psychiatric illness. Patients suffering from psychiatric disorders exhibited higher rates of general morbidity, consulted their doctors more frequently, and appeared to have more marital problems, to spend more time off work, or to present permanent incapacity, when compared with the remainder.

(d) GP treatment consisted largely of drugs or discussion, or both, and almost a third of patients with psychiatric disorders received no treatment.

(e) GPs dealt with the bulk of identified psychiatric morbidity themselves, referring only 5% to specialist psychiatric services.

In retrospect these investigations, based on the principles of epidemiological inquiry, may be viewed as a landmark in the development of a new dimension in the study of mental disorders. The results documented the hitherto unsuspected volume of mental illness in the community, the central role of GPs in the detection, identification and treatment of psychiatric disorders and, as a corollary, lent support to the growth of a novel style of service based on GP/psychiatrist attachments in primary care.

Psychiatric Illness in General Practice was first published in 1966. In the following year Michael Shepherd was appointed to the first ever chair of epidemiological psychiatry, at the Institute of Psychiatry. As honorary director of the General Practice Research Unit he initiated a large-scale programme of research and was responsible for training many of the academic workers who now occupy prominent positions in the field of epidemiological psychiatry (Shepherd, 1973; Wilkinson, 1989). In Shepherd's paper, "Psychiatric epidemiology and epidemiological psychiatry" (1985), he has indicated the perspective adopted and its relevance to theory and practice.

On his retirement in 1988 a group of his colleagues prepared a Festschrift, *The Scope of Epidemiological Psychiatry* (Williams *et al*, 1989), which brought together theory, experiment, and practical applications relating to the epidemiological approach to

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mental disorder. The volume outlines the principles on which epidemiological inquiries are based, and places emphasis on the mutual contribution that epidemiology and other disciplines together can offer to the advancement of scientific knowledge about the causes and treatment of mental disorders.

Four significant issues emerge from this compilation of 32 chapters by over 40 experts:

(a) the scientific methods that underpin epidemiological psychiatry include historical enquiry, social science and quantitative techniques
(b) epidemiological studies of mental disorder are concerned with charting historical trends, completing the clinical picture of disease, delineating new syndromes, identifying causal factors and computing individual morbid risks
(c) for the comprehensive evaluation of psychiatric treatment it is necessary to complement results from clinical trials of specific treatment approaches with the evaluation of service provision, and to analyse the relationships between these factors and public policy
(d) epidemiological psychiatry is not confined within national boundaries, and the requirement for a global perspective is self-evident; this helps to orientate the international research and clinical community to prevalent and relevant problems, to enhance research potential, to generate and disseminate research methods, and to facilitate international collaboration.

In essence, epidemiological psychiatry is now established as a discipline: it provides the basic approach for a public health perspective on mental illness and its methods and techniques can be expected to illuminate both the biological and psychosocial associations of mental disorders. The bibliography illustrates its growing importance.

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Further reading

Journals

Two journals are devoted to psychiatric epidemiology: *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* and *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale* (in English and Italian). *Psychological Medicine* has published several key articles and monograph/supplements.

Journal articles

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Books

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COOPER, B. (ed.) (1987) *Psychiatric Epidemiology: Progress and Prospects*. London: Croom Helm. (These proceedings of an international symposium sponsored by the World Psychiatric Association's Section of Epidemiology and Community Psychiatry provide an overview of developments over the past 20 years.)

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