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DEAR SIR,

The strike of Local Authority Social Workers which took place at the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979, whatever the problems it caused afforded an opportunity to examine some aspects of the workings of the Mental Health Act 1959 (Review of the Mental Health Act, 1959. Command 7320, 1978. HMSO). It would be anticipated, and observation would suggest, that the number of compulsory admissions to hospital would fall.

Statistics were obtained for compulsory and informal admissions to Middlewood Hospital from the Sheffield area for the months of October to January inclusive for the years 1976—7, 1977—8 and 1978—9. Figures were also obtained for the number of patients admitted informally who were made the subject of a detention order during their period of admission over the same three periods. The data was examined using the Chi squared test, partitioning the overall Chi squared according to a method described by Maxwell, 1961 (Analysing Qualitative Data. London: Methuen) to check that observed differences related to the relevant changes in circumstances. There was a significant drop in compulsory admissions. (a. and b. Chi squared overall 11.771 df 2 P <0.01: 1976 and 1977 vs 1978 9.255 df 1 P <0.01) and a rise in compulsory detention of informal patients in the relevant period (c. Chi squared overall 21.408 df 2 P <0.001: 1976 and 1977 vs 1978 20.769 df 1 P <0.001) but the total number of patients who were detained compulsorily at some time during their stay in hospital did not change significantly. (Chi squared does not attain 0.05 level).

Thus it appears that at least in the Sheffield area it has been possible to admit significantly fewer patients compulsorily than was the practice in the past, as has been suggested by those apprehensive about the workings of the Mental Health Act 1959. However the figures relating to the subsequent imposition of compulsory detention on informal patients suggest that, at least numerically, the increase in this practice balances almost exactly the fall in initial compulsion. Of course it is not necessarily the same individuals who will be affected.

If it is accepted that the overall infliction of compulsory detention is constant and if the general principle that such detention is necessary at times is also accepted, there remains the problem of when compulsion should be applied. We suggest that the present findings imply that undue initial reluctance to use compulsion may result in its subsequent imposition in circumstances which may lead patients to feel that they have been misled. It is perhaps a matter for the individual psychiatrist to decide which approach is the more acceptable but it means that this is a dilemma which is unlikely to be resolved by regulation.

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References
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