Time to change – let’s end mental health discrimination: the challenges ahead

October 2007 marked the launch of another programme in England to tackle stigma and discrimination. ‘Time to Change’ models national initiatives from New Zealand and Scotland drawing on an expanding stigma evidence base as well as lessons from past projects, including the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ ‘Defeat Depression’ and ‘Changing Minds’ campaigns.

How might this programme succeed where others have stalled? The programme is resource rich with £18 million from the Big Lottery Fund and Comic Relief to channel into 35 linked programmes. It has 4 years to prove change among targeted audiences within a 30 million adult reach. It is a four-party coalition with a desire to learn from organisations across health and disability fields. It is adopting an evidence-based approach – but this does not guarantee success.

Key challenges are identifiable. Preparatory consultation during February 2008 using a pragmatic, non-systematic survey method through the membership networks of 18 organisations generated responses from 3038 service users and 661 family or friend carers.

This consultation emphasised first, that stigma and discrimination are widespread and their impact far-reaching.

(a) Seventy-one per cent reported to have stopped doing things – accessing employment, making friends, joining groups, engaging with health professionals.

(b) Seventy-three per cent reported anticipated discrimination including one in two who fear disclosing their health problems because of the negative reactions they might receive.

(c) Carers reported fewer personal effects but 85% felt that the person they supported was affected.

(d) Time to Change will need to target its efforts to have a meaningful impact in any one area.

Second, that combating stigma and discrimination is not straightforward. Service users and carers warned that the entangled nature of mental illness and their own and other people’s reactions make generic solutions difficult to find. Pinpointing exact goals for the 35 Time to Change programmes in terms of what needs to change will be central to proving any success.

Third, that Time to Change must set realistic goals. Variation in experiences particularly relating to physical health disabilities, sexuality, severe mental illness diagnosis and ethnicity of carers were found. Stakeholders will not equally benefit from Time to Change and the programme must be open and honest about its limitations from the outset. There is a danger that if it ‘fails’ to have an impact on lived experience of stigma and discrimination, people will give up hope that any change is possible.

Health professionals have a key role to play. General practitioners and psychiatrists were listed as stigma-generating agents, while National Health Service mental health trusts were prioritised by one in ten as the key target location for the social marketing campaign. However, the role goes far beyond being a target for interventions. Alongside Time to Change, momentum behind recovery-driven services is gathering pace.3 Joining initiatives across psychiatry that have an impact on stigma and discrimination will assist this programme. For more information, please visit www.time-to-change.org.uk.

Declaration of interest

V.P. is employed by Rethink, one of the Time to Change partners.


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Edited by Kiriakos Xenitidis and Colin Campbell

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Neuropsychiatric systemic lupus erythematosus associated with neuroleptic malignant syndrome

Neuropsychiatric manifestations such as anxiety, mood disorders, and psychosis are frequent features of systemic lupus erythematosus. A psychosis prevalence of 5% has been reported.1,2 Neuroleptic malignant syndrome is a life-threatening complication of treatment with antipsychotics.2 High-potency antipsychotics increase the risk.

We report the clinical case of a 23-year-old woman presenting early-onset neuropsychiatric systemic lupus erythematosus with interstitial pneumonopathy, glomerulonephritis and malar rash. When she was 20 years old, she had been hospitalised for her first episode with acute psychotic symptoms (mystic delusions) and agitation. The introduction of droperidol led to a neuroleptic malignant syndrome with high creatinine phosphokinase levels, muscular rigidity, hyperthermia and blood pressure dysregulation. The droperidol was stopped and benzodiazepines were used.

The patient was rehospitalised when she was 23 years old in a similar state because she had not observed the immuno-suppressant treatment. No new giotic cerebral lesions appeared on cerebral magnetic resonance imaging. The psychiatrist decided to introduce valproic acid and benzodiazepines in order to avoid antipsychotics. However, the mental state of the patient quickly led to delirium with repetitive, delusional and incoherent speech and behaviour. Despite the risk of neuroleptic malignant syndrome, a one-shot intramuscular injection of clotiapine was administered. Once again, we observed muscular rigidity, dehydration (148 mEq/l natrium) and systolic hypertension. Her
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Strawn JR, Keck PE Jr, Caroff SN. Neuroleptic malignant syndrome.

Stojanovich L, Zandman-Goddard G, Pavlovich S, Sikanich N. Psychiatric manifestations in systemic lupus erythematosus. It usually includes immunosuppressants associated with second-generation antipsychotics. The diagnosis of neuroleptic malignant syndrome is based on muscle rigidity, hyperthermia, delirium and autonomic disturbances. The dopaminergic hypothesis of the syndrome is well documented. Neuroleptic malignant syndrome is not an absolute contraindication for further anti-psychotic treatment and some factors can reduce that risk: avoiding the long-term use of antipsychotics, using low-potency agents, adjunctive treatments and slow titration.

In this case, we suggest that the introduction of quetiapine—a lower D2-affinity antipsychotic—was an interesting alternative.


Are antidepressants safe during pregnancy?

Ramos et al1 report that the use of antidepressant medications by women during the first trimester of pregnancy is not associated with an increased risk for major congenital malformations in children. The authors have a good database to study this topic but have described and analysed it using a case–control framework. Although there are no guidelines for the treatment of the psychiatric manifestations of systemic lupus erythematosus, it usually includes immunosuppressants associated with second-generation antipsychotics. The diagnosis of neuroleptic malignant syndrome is based on muscle rigidity, hyperthermia, delirium and autonomic disturbances. The dopaminergic hypothesis of the syndrome is well documented. Neuroleptic malignant syndrome is not an absolute contraindication for further anti-psychotic treatment and some factors can reduce that risk: avoiding the long-term use of antipsychotics, using low-potency agents, adjunctive treatments and slow titration.

In this case, we suggest that the introduction of quetiapine—a lower D2-affinity antipsychotic—was an interesting alternative.


Authors’ reply: The nested case–control approach that we used is the most effective design to study rare outcomes such as major congenital malformations. This is even truer since it was performed in a well-established cohort of women with pre-pregnancy diagnosed psychiatric disorders. We disagree with Rajkumar & Jacob that a cohort approach would have been better, based on the fact that it lacks power for research in perinatal pharmacoepidemiology. This was clearly apparent when several small human cohort studies published in the 1990s did not suggest their arguments, as a cohort design is superior to a case–control strategy.

However, we suggest caution in generalising these findings because of two important limitations that were not acknowledged in their paper. If antidepressants are associated with more spontaneous abortions and an increased number of minor congenital anomalies, their lack of association with major congenital anomalies will not imply safety. A previous meta-analysis of 3567 women established a significantly increased RR of 1.45 (95% CI 1.19–1.77) for spontaneous abortions following use of antidepressants during pregnancy. Individual antidepressants such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and other newer antidepressants have led to more miscarriages when compared with unexposed control groups. As Ramos et al have included exclusively women who had their pregnancies ending in delivery, they do not add any information regarding spontaneous abortions.

In another study of 482 pregnant women, fluoxetine caused significantly more prematurity (RR=4.8, 95% CI 1.1–20.8), more admissions to special care nurseries (RR=2.6, 95% CI 1.1–6.9) and worse neonatal adaptation (RR=8.7, 95% CI 2.9–26.6) after adjusting for all potential confounders. A total of 15.5% of infants exposed to fluoxetine had three or more minor congenital anomalies compared with 6.5% of infants who were not exposed to fluoxetine (P=0.03). However, Ramos et al excluded minor congenital anomalies during case ascertainment without any explicit justification. Absence of association between use of antidepressants and major congenital malformations will not make a clinician confident to continue antidepressants during the first trimester of pregnancy if there are concerns over spontaneous abortions, prematurity and minor congenital anomalies. Hence, we encourage cautious interpretation of these findings as well as judicious use of antidepressants for women of reproductive age.
an overall increased risk for birth defects with first-trimester exposure to any selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors but later studies with more efficient designs such as the case–control approach started showing low-to-moderate increased risks for the more commonly occurring birth defects such as heart defects, neural tube defects and oral clefts. Therefore, using a cohort approach would have resulted again in a null finding, contrary to Rajkumar & Jacob’s comments.

We excluded pregnancies ending with abortion or miscarriage per design since malformation outcomes of these foetuses were not available in the Quebec Pregnancy Registry. We agree that this resulted in prevalent cases of malformations in our study but this is highly comparable to studies performed in similar populations. We do not, however, agree that this methodological choice resulted in biasing our study estimates towards the null. Indeed, although Hemels et al. reported an association between antidepressant use during pregnancy and risk of spontaneous abortion, this was based on women’s self-report and likely resulted in an overestimation of the rate of miscarriage and an underestimation of the rate of abortion, hence a significant association.

Major congenital malformations are structural abnormalities that affect the way a person looks and require medical and/or surgical treatment. Minor defects are abnormalities that do not cause serious health or social problems. Major defects were the focus of interest in our study and, although the risk of minor malformations is interesting, it is a different research question. Several other authors have previously made this distinction. We agree that results from observational studies always need to be interpreted with caution. However, given that from an ethical point of view it is almost impossible to randomise pregnant women to receive medications not known to be safe for the foetuses, the collection and follow-up of observational data is the only ethical way to close the knowledge gap between the limited value of animal studies and human pregnancy exposures.

Finally, our study was not designed to look at the effect of the duration of specific antidepressants on the risk of specific major congenital malformations. Therefore, we only looked at duration of antidepressant use during the first trimester of gestation and its risk for major congenital malformations, all types and all malformations combined. Results should be interpreted in this context.

Declaration of interest
This study was supported by the Fonds de la Recherche en Santé du Québec (FRSQ, grant number: 6263), the Réseau Québécois de Recherche sur l’Usage des Médicaments (RQRUM), and the FRSQ network for the well-being of children.


Authors’ reply: We thank Dr MacFarlane for his favourable comments on our views. The development of research designs that can rigorously test the complexities of mental health intervention and also have face validity to clinicians is at the centre of our concern. In a brief editorial we could do no more than whet the readers’ appetites. There was no mention of structural equation modelling because of lack of space, and not because we do not have sympathies with the technique. In fact, one of us (G.D.) has taught structural equation modelling for nearly 20 years. When used wisely and with correctly specified models, structural equation modelling approaches can be very powerful – but they do not obviate the need for good design (including the randomisation in an RCT). In particular, MacFarlane is mistaken when he suggests that the use of structural equation modelling (MIMIC)
models can successfully address issues of hidden confounding in the absence of appropriate design. Although enthusiasts in the social and behavioural sciences have used structural equation models and ‘causal models’ interchangeably for many years, their naivety has frequently brought structural equation modelling into disrepute. Pearl’s book covers structural modelling in the appropriate way, but many readers of this journal will find it a bit heavy going. We do indeed plan to publish on these issues in much greater detail in the near future.

Declaration of interest

G.D. is a member of the UK Mental Health Research Network (MHRN) Methodology Research Group. Methodological research funding for both G.D. and J.G. is provided by the UK Medical Research Council (grant numbers G0600555/G0401546).

The most undeserving poor?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, proposes removing payment of benefits from unemployed persons with addiction to crack cocaine and heroin.1,2 The proposed Green Paper3 sets a remarkable precedent in terms of official, statutory services! other psychiatric disorder that excludes citizens from access to policing the state benefit system? Politicians, high on prejudice, are driving a coach and horses through the subtle art of treatment. Therapy is working relationships with their patients while simultaneously destroying medical confidentiality and grossly interfering in treatment. Therapy is the core of the doctor–patient relationship, destroying the biomedical case. Biomedical psychiatry complements psychosocial psychiatry and is uniquely part of

College of Psychiatrists? If doctors do not speak up for their most vulnerable patients, who will?


Wake-up call for British psychiatry: responses

The paper by Craddock et al3 and the subsequent eLetters illustrate the variety of opinions that attracted me to psychiatry. I work in a multi-agency service and our assessments and interventions can be carried out by professionals in Mind, in social services and in the National Health Service (NHS). In our service we share responsibilities. This allows me (a consultant psychiatrist) to pursue a resurgent interest in psychopharmacology, treatment adherence and the harm caused by side-effects of medication. Although I appreciate the academic endeavours in biomedical science, I believe it is very important to contextualise them for non-academics. Randomised controlled trials don’t speak to clinicians as well as naturalistic studies. I have noticed that some of my psychiatric colleagues (and myself at times) shy away from precise diagnosis, acutely aware of how diagnoses are deliberately used to stigmatise people by individuals outside mental health services (as well as within). This is happening at a time when case definitions are becoming important to health service managers. Perhaps some psychiatrists are uncomfortable in their traditional territory. However, if psychiatrists step back too far, then others will move in. I expect that senior managers, rather than other clinicians or service users, are likely to move into the spaces that we vacate. Psychiatrists should not support the replacement of ‘doctor knows best’ with ‘manager knows best’. New Ways of Working may end up doing exactly that. Instead of being a shot in the arm, it may be a shot in the foot. Four trusts in the north of England are already constructing their own diagnostic systems to use alongside or instead of existing diagnostic schemes as a currency for payment by results. Assigning patients to pseudo-diagnostic ‘care clusters’ could be something all staff do, not just the doctors. If psychiatrists step back from diagnosis, then diagnosis may change from a clinical concept with an associated evidence base, to a financial planning tool. There are other drivers of change too. In the prevalent atmosphere of anxiety and blame, risk assessment, not diagnosis, is now arguably the main gateway into acute mental health services. This means that some very ill people may have to wait for treatment, while people who seem to be at acute risk are attended to first.

Times change and if psychiatrists of any persuasion want to retain some influence they have to put up, not shut up; so well done for making the biomedical case. Biomedical psychiatry
medical doctors’ expertise. The Royal College of Psychiatrists should take this issue up with its members.


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One cheer at least for Craddock et al’s1 polemic. Critical of the de-medicalisation and role-diffusion which they see as characterising contemporary British psychiatry, they argue that those with severe mental illnesses are best served by an initial consultation with a professional with the diagnostic skills of the consultant psychiatrist. Without such an intervention, they claim, the patient is likely to be psychopharmacologically disadvantaged, possible physical disorders may be overlooked and scientific advances not brought to bear on their illness.

Nevertheless a neutral observer might be tempted to see their ‘wake-up call’ as a tendentious attempt to regain hegemony by the psychiatric establishment. Their ad hominem ‘thought experiment’ – inviting readers to ask themselves whether they would be happy for ‘a member of their family’ to be cared for under the ‘distributed responsibility’ model – seems unworthy of such illustrious academics, a hostage to the possibility that many will take the contrary view. The two absent cheers are for the missing psychosocial components of Mayer’s bio-psychosocial triad, first proposed a century ago, midway between Reil2 and Craddock et al. Indeed, that lack exemplifies the narrowness of vision which has arguably led to the very crisis which they bemoan. Nowhere do the authors consider the social forces driving de-professionalisation: the need to contain burgeoning healthcare budgets; flattening of social hierarchies, with leadership to be earned rather than role-bestowed; and technology-driven fragmentation of care.

Understanding these processes, and knowing how to work productively with the rivalries and distortions they create, is as essential to the psychiatrist’s repertoire as the latest psychopharmacology update. Nor are these issues confined to psychiatry, not excluding the cardiology model so dear to their hearts. The good general physician who takes an overview of a whole patient, including psychological aspects, and is not merely a technical expert in the minutiae of a malfunctioning organ, is as rare a species as the putative ‘superlative’ psychiatrist.

Craddock et al’s view of the science relevant to psychiatry is similarly limited, confining itself to molecular biology and neuroscience. There is no mention of recent advances in developmental psychopathology3 which illuminate the psychological deficits of psychiatric illness, and the interpersonal skills needed by therapists of ameliorate them, or of psychotherapy process–outcome research which is beginning to tell us which kinds of therapy work best for which kinds of condition and process–outcome research which is beginning to tell us which kinds of therapy work best for which kinds of condition and process–outcome research which is beginning to tell us which kinds of therapy work best for which kinds of condition and personality. Waking up is the instant when dreams momentarily enter consciousness. Behind their grumpy growling, Craddock et al’s ‘view of the science relevant to psychiatry is similarly limited, confining itself to molecular biology and neuroscience. There is no mention of recent advances in developmental psychopathology3 which illuminate the psychological deficits of psychiatric illness, and the interpersonal skills needed by therapists of ameliorate them, or of psychotherapy process–outcome research which is beginning to tell us which kinds of therapy work best for which kinds of condition and personality. Waking up is the instant when dreams momentarily enter consciousness. Behind their grumpy growling, Craddock et al’s reverie sounds like regressive nostalgia for an idealised past – inviting readers to ask themselves whether they would be happy for a member of their family’ to be cared for under the ‘distributed responsibility’ model – seems unworthy of such illustrious academics, a hostage to the possibility that many will take the contrary view. The two absent cheers are for the missing psychosocial components of Mayer’s bio-psychosocial triad, first proposed a century ago, midway between Reil2 and Craddock et al. Indeed, that lack exemplifies the narrowness of vision which has arguably led to the very crisis which they bemoan. Nowhere do the authors consider the social forces driving de-professionalisation: the need to contain burgeoning healthcare budgets; flattening of social hierarchies, with leadership to be earned rather than role-bestowed; and technology-driven fragmentation of care.

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include dream interpretation – is more likely to regain a key role in the surely-here-to-stay multidisciplinary team than one whose expertise is narrowly confined to ‘excellence’ in prescribing, desir-able though that no doubt is.


Craddock et al1 make some interesting points about the role of the psychiatrist. It is unashamedly made from a psychiatrist’s perspective.

We would like to comment from a primary care perspective, since many of the issues raised have a significant bearing on the way primary care works currently and how it may work in the future.

The authors make the point that ‘psychiatry is a medical specialty’ and that general practitioners should have the opportu-nity to refer patients for an opinion when they are unclear about the diagnosis or treatment. Sadly, in our experience, this rarely happens, as patients who have a mood disorder such as depression or anxiety are often told that they do not fulfil the criteria for refer-ral (understood by the patient to mean that they are not ‘ill enough’) to see a psychiatrist. It is a rare occurrence where a psychiatrist will intervene in the administrative chore of ‘bouncing the patient’ back to the GP, so that the patient does benefit from the opinion. Such referrals are often pejoratively labelled as inappropriate, implying a lack of competence by the referrer.

This behaviour, of screening out people with certain con-ditions, is justified on the grounds that psychiatrists should concentrate on the most ill, that is the psychoses, and that they quote the National Service Framework for Mental Health as supporting this stance. No other medical specialty diverts patients away from a medical opinion in the same way. It is a sad testament to both primary and secondary care clinicians that the person who was able to negotiate an improved level of care for people with a significant mental illness such as depression or anxiety was an economist, making an economic argument at the highest level of government.

The authors also make the case that they should be responsible for managing the physical healthcare needs of the people for whom they care. They are, according to the authors, first and foremost highly trained doctors. What has stopped psychiatrists providing this care in the past? Are the authors really making the case that they should manage not only the psychiatric needs of a person with schizophrenia, but also that person’s diabetes, hypertension, obesity and osteoarthritis, would you want these conditions managed by a psychiatrist, or a GP?

If there is a real concern that psychiatrists no longer have the opportunity to practise the specialty in which they trained, then they should do something about it. The National Service Framework for Mental Health is coming to an end – so the restrictions on who psychiatrists will see should also come to an end. If psychiatrists wish to behave as other medical consultants, then they should see the referrals made to their teams – as team leaders it is in their gift to do so. It may well be that some form of screening may be necessary, but do so based on patient need, not on the basis of a diagnosis.


There are a number of key issues which those who have criticised the ‘Wake-up call for British psychiatry’1 have failed to address.

(a) In order that any illness be treated, proper assessment and diagnosis is necessary. Is there definitive evidence that complex problems such as very early psychotic illness (at-risk mental states) or type II bipolar disorder can be properly identified by non-medical staff without specific training? Is there a possibility that cases may be missed – and how big is this risk?

(b) How certain can any doctor – or indeed any person – be that they can assess ‘service users’ appropriately based only on the reported assessment of others? This is different from asking other respected professionals for their considered opinion in a multidisciplinary meeting.

(c) Why is psychiatry the only medical specialty where many seem to feel that we can accept ‘patient choice’ to take or not take medication with entire equanimity, even though we know that antipsychotic medication and antidepressants do actually help treat symptoms . . . and then why do we suddenly become concerned when tragedy happens because of non-concordance with medication?

(d) Why do we in the UK expect other professions to deliver all psychological interventions, while we simply seem to provide biological treatment? Why do we not provide psychotherapy as well as medication as many of our colleagues in Europe do? Should there not be one standard for how psychia-tric help is delivered across the continent of Europe . . . and should this not obviously be holistic?

(e) Having been a GP for many years before going into psychiatry, I would ask, why are psychiatrists and their teams happy to dispense with the common courtesy of expecting the person addressed to answer a GP referral; in what other profession is ‘sending the referral back because it is inappropriate’ after a brief discussion in a multidisciplinary meeting considered an appropriate response? When this happens, is it not the service user who suffers because their problem is not dealt with?
(f) On the other hand, as a GP, I would certainly consider carefully who to refer to secondary care and would use all my skills, as acquired in my GP training, before referral. I would also consult my liaison community psychiatric nurse or other attached mental health professional if I had one, and if necessary consult the consultant psychiatrist over the phone. However, a good GP will expect to be able to refer problems which they cannot solve to secondary care, and then expect the referral to be treated with respect by the consultant psychiatrist colleague with an adequate response, for GPs are specialists in their own right.

(g) Finally, in all of this debate, we have entirely forgotten that the reason service users consult doctors is the doctor–patient relationship, which is a relationship based on trust in another person, who may or may not have a greater or lesser knowledge of psychology and neuroscience, but who most of all is a person to be confided in during difficult times. This is what we must be as doctors, and all our discussions about ‘the role of the consultant’ pales into insignificance before this.

We must remember how Sir James Spence defined the consultation: ‘The occasion when, in the intimacy of the consulting room, a person who is ill, or believes himself to be ill, seeks the advice of a doctor whom he trusts. This is a consultation.’ If we forget this, then what indeed is the point of our being doctors?


2 Spence J. The need for understanding the individual as a part of the training and functions of doctors and nurses (speech delivered at a conference on mental health held in March 1949). In The Purpose and Practice of Medicine: Selections from the Writings of Sir James Spence. pp. 273–4. Oxford University Press, 1960.

We welcome the debate initiated by Craddock et al and agree that the role of the psychiatrist is key to the delivery of high-quality services, and may be currently threatened. However, we believe that their proposals would be restrictive and counterproductive. If the psychiatrist has to assess all those referred to secondary care, the role of the psychiatrist is key to the delivery of high-quality services, including by Craddock et al. If we forget this, then what indeed is the point of our being doctors?

The interpretation in *The Times* of Craddock et al risks alienating multidisciplinary colleagues and patients alike, turning a call for quality services into an appeal for primacy for the psychiatric profession.

New Ways of Working is similarly open to misinterpretation, including by Craddock et al. A fundamental principle of New Ways of Working is freeing up the appropriate staff to work with the patient. That means consultant practitioners working with those with the most complex needs – exactly what these doctors ordered.

Yet Craddock et al appear defensive, undermining their own call for self-confident progress. Why get exercised about...
use of the term ‘mental health’ rather than ‘mental illness’. The
government has stressed repeatedly in the National Health Service
Next Stage Review that maintenance of health and well-being is its
job just as much as treatment of illness. Performance management,
outcome measures and payment by results drive vague ‘support’
out of the system, promoting more structured, evidence-based
care delivery.

The Future Vision Coalition, comprising leading mental
health charities, directors of social services, the Mental Health
Foundation and, crucially, the network of our employer trusts,
has just published A New Vision for Mental Health,5 bringing
health and social models together, focusing more on health
promotion and on quality of life rather than illness, and redefining
relationships between services and users. If the psychiatric
profession endorses Craddock et al’s vision instead, who is likely
to end up out of step and disregarded?

The current investment in improving access to psychological
therapies demonstrates how those evidence-based services have
not been over-provided or over-used to date, whereas 93% of
patients have been prescribed medication. The National Institute
for Health and Clinical Excellence6 stresses the efficacy of both
psychological and psychosocial interventions. The relevant expert
should lead discussions where biomedical approaches are key, but
where that is not the case or the whole story, which is often,
the other experts are similarly important. ‘Jollying along’ was seen
when other professions were the handmaidens of psychiatrists,
only trusted to give ‘support’; now they may be prescribing as well
as delivering other therapeutic interventions.

Politically correct terms like ‘service user’ have arisen
because of stigma, which psychiatrists have played their part in
perpetuating, being accused of low expectations, making
assumptions about behaviour based on diagnostic labels,
patronising or unhelpful letters, using patients as ‘cases’ for
training, and promoting the ‘medical’ model while dismissing
side-effects as ‘psychological’.

Our answer to their ‘thought experiment’ question – would
you opt for a distributed responsibility model if a member of
your family was the patient – is a resounding ‘yes please’. Going
back to a psychiatrist with a case-load of hundreds, or awaiting
the arrival of yet another locum for a decision, is neither safe
nor satisfactory. Lord Darzi5 heralds a ‘new professionalism’ based
on teamwork; teams can only be efficient and effective if members
ask me to see someone who they think
may have depression, my training enables me to not only exclude
diagnosis and treat appropriately and I do this well. When other
members of the team ask me to see someone who they think
may have depression, my training enables me to not only exclude
depression but to pick up the drowsiness, slurred speech and small
deafness.3

It is reassuring to see that experienced psychiatrists have strong
assumptions about behaviour based on diagnostic labels,
patronising or unhelpful letters, using patients as ‘cases’ for
training, and promoting the ‘medical’ model while dismissing
side-effects as ‘psychological’.

Our answer to their ‘thought experiment’ question – would
you opt for a distributed responsibility model if a member of
your family was the patient – is a resounding ‘yes please’. Going
back to a psychiatrist with a case-load of hundreds, or awaiting
the arrival of yet another locum for a decision, is neither safe
nor satisfactory. Lord Darzi5 heralds a ‘new professionalism’ based
on teamwork; teams can only be efficient and effective if members
are appropriately skilled, competent and take responsibility for
what they do.

We agree with Craddock et al that psychiatry can have a great
future, but only by embracing teamwork, abandoning hegemony
and accepting the importance of social and psychological as well
as biological determinants of mental ill health, rather than harking
back to a past which was actually far from ideal.

Cradock et al3 present a compelling argument for retaining the
biomedical model of psychiatric illness, while acknowledging that
evidence-based psychosocial interventions do have an important
place in management and treatment.

It is their discussion about New Ways of Working that
particularly struck a chord with me. As a third-year specialist
registrant who will soon be looking for consultant jobs, I find
myself in a dilemma: am I for New Ways of Working or against it?

Case-loads of 300 patients seen briefly in 15-min ‘routine’ out-
patient clinics; one urgent appointment after another; the
community team, day unit and GPs all wanting their patients to be
seen only by the consultant;7 shouldering responsibility for
patients not seen or advised on by me; to me, all of this sounds
like a certain recipe for early burnout. Is it any surprise that I
do not want any of this?

On the other hand, my medical training has taught me to
diagnose and treat appropriately and I do this well. When other
members of the team ask me to see someone who they think
may have depression, my training enables me to not only exclude
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1 Hawkes N. Mentally ill are ‘jollied along’ rather than treated by psychiatrists. The Times 2008; 27 June.


severe mental illness as opposed to ‘mental health problems’. The latter may not require specialist psychiatric input as medicalising problems of living is clearly undesirable.

The centrally driven ‘one size fits all’ approach to ‘modern’ service delivery has left many patients with serious psychiatric illness bereft of the clinical expertise and leadership to effectively manage their condition. Notions of complexity (undefined) and risk have superseded diagnostic context. The ‘diffusion of responsibility’ as conceptualised in New Ways of Working often leads to unfocused care plans and risk management assessments without the one element essential to modifying any risks – that is, effective psychiatric treatment based on a comprehensive diagnostic formulation and understanding of the nature of the illness. Accurate diagnosis not only allows appropriate treatments for individual patients but also prioritisation of resources in service delivery. Furthermore, a diagnostic threshold is an essential requirement of the Mental Capacity Act in the assessment of capacity of our most vulnerable patients.

Major changes in psychiatric management and service structure have been introduced that are mostly not evidence based and certainly not consequent upon real advances in treatment. The political dimension to this process makes constructive criticism difficult. The letter to The Times from Kinderman and members of the New Ways of Working Care Services Improvement Partnership and National Institute of Mental Health exemplifies this.1 In response to the article by Craddock et al they refer disparingly to the ‘traditional medical model’ in contrast to ‘modern mental healthcare’ which is a ‘collaborative team effort’ as if the medical model concerns itself only with medical matters in the most narrow sense. They also suggest that some psychiatrists are unable to ‘cope with the loss of hegemony’ and refer by implication to Craddock et al as demonstrating ‘intellectual arrogance ... and assumptions of superiority’. Their response to it mildly offers little basis for constructive debate and has previously been described as ‘messianic’ in tone.3

Like many psychiatrists engaged in the treatment of serious mental illness and organic brain disease we look to our professional body the Royal College of Psychiatrists for a lead but find our views are not adequately represented.


I would like to provide a medical student’s perspective on the paper by Craddock et al.2 I am about to enter my 4th year of medicine (having just completed an intercalated BSc in psychology and medicine) and will soon have my first real exposure to clinical psychiatry. Although I am keen on psychiatry, the majority of my fellow students are happy to express disaith at the thought of a psychiatric career. It is obviously difficult to say why this might be the case but something is clearly amiss in the way that psychiatry is being presented to tomorrow’s doctors.

During my BSc, it was interesting to gain insight into the opinion that psychologists have of psychiatry, which unfortunately was one of ‘over-medicalisation’ and neglect of psychosocial factors. For me, this reiterated the importance of early positive interaction between the two professions and a need for better understanding of each others’ strengths. Perhaps this interaction is best initiated during undergraduate training?

More importantly, and from the angle of a card-carrying wannabe psychiatrist, this paper has confirmed that clinical psychiatry is attractive to me not because it is excessively reductionist but because it deals with the complex interplay between psychiatric (and non-psychiatric) illness and countless important psychosocial factors. Furthermore – and this may be the blind optimism of youth talking – I hope to become an excellent physician who is trusted and respected by her patients. Because of this, I am not discouraged by those who fail to consider psychiatrists as ‘proper doctors’, although it is clear to me that this negative view by other doctors acts as a deterrent for some of my colleagues who might have been interested in a psychiatric career.

Finally, on a more anecdotal note, I have the perspective of someone who has lost a relative because of failure in psychiatric and non-psychiatric care and social support. Had an appropriate (and properly functioning) multidisciplinary team been in place, both in assessment and management, I believe that the outcome would have been very different. So in response to the question ‘if a member of your family were a patient, is a distributed responsibilty model the one for which you would opt?’ my answer would be an uncertain ‘ummm, I think so’, so long as this included the appropriate level of assessment and involvement of a senior psychiatrist alongside other professionals.

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than anything resembling biomedical pathology. If the global burden of depression is to be lifted, it will require more than specifying more clearly the key role of psychiatrists.

Although Craddock et al were clearly offended by talk of mental health and well-being, this focus is long overdue. Talk of ‘mental illness’ and ‘our patients’ is regressive and paternalistic. On the 60th anniversary of the NHS it should be unnecessary to advocate well-being as the purpose of healthcare. Mental health advocacy joins the abolition of slavery, votes for women, feminism and gay rights as another example of emancipation within Western society. The ‘service user’ title may be unsatisfactory, but is another linguistic step towards acknowledging that people are the agents of their lives. They must be addressed as persons if genuine emancipatory mental healthcare is to become a reality.

The learning disabilities field provides a precedent. A generation ago, most people with significant forms of ‘mental sub-normality/deficiency’ lived in hospitals under the care of psychiatrists. Today, despite the influence of genetic anomalies or organic disorders such people live in natural communities, albeit with broad-based psychosocial support. Some may have occasional need to consult physicians, but their lives no longer revolve around their diagnosis. This change in philosophy did not devalue psychiatry but did acknowledge that all problems in human living affect persons. All talk of psychiatric treatment should follow suit, embracing the word’s original meaning: the ‘manner of behaving towards or dealing with a person’.

Regrettably, Craddock et al’s rallying call will be offensive to many service users who have struggled to detach themselves from the more unfortunate aspects of traditional psychiatry. It will also be dispiriting to many of their colleagues. Craddock et al may be surprised to discover that nurses have already joined psychiatrists as statutory prescribers of medication,5 and some clinical teams recognise the virtue of electing the professional best qualified to inspire and nurture the team.6 Time, perhaps, to wake up and recognise the virtue of electing the professional best qualified to manage (as is currently the vogue) makes a mockery of the skills needed to practice psychiatry to an adequate standard. By delegating initial assessment to generic team members, the art of psychiatry appears to have been reduced to a ‘paint by numbers’ approach, that is anything but patient-centred. Looking at the fashion in which changes have been implemented, it is easy to make comparison with other Department of Health initiatives (such as the Medical Training Application Service/Modernising Medical Careers fiasco7). On this occasion, however, the College has the opportunity to effect change. The gauntlet has been thrown to the College to poll its membership on the implementation of New Ways of Working; this issue will not go away and needs to be resolved.

I thoroughly enjoyed the Editorial by Craddock et al,1 and would like to address the following points. First, the perceived ‘lack of recruitment and retention in psychiatry’. Though there has been considerable mention of this, anyone involved in psychiatric training or workforce planning recently will be aware of the changes in numbers in the years since systems such as New Ways of Working2 were conceptualised. What has not been mentioned (and what is more pertinent) is the effect of such changes on future recruitment and retention.

Second, the educational standards that we, as trainees, are expected to achieve are laudable, and (justifiably) a great deal of effort has been spent over the years by the Royal College of Psychiatrists to refine these (a recent example being the curriculum submitted by the College to the Postgraduate Medical Education Training Board). The delegation of assessment to multidisciplinary team members, without adequate, standardised assessment of competency, is worrying. Clinical experience has shown that GPs, when they refer patients, might not have conducted an exhaustive neurological examination or battery of tests to exclude organic causes, and would expect these to be picked up by secondary services. It is beyond the boundaries of reason (and team supervision) to expect multidisciplinary team members to be aware of organic presentations, neuroendocrine signs and symptoms, and subtleties on history and mental state examination that come with the experience (and training) of a psychiatrist. The equivalent would be a neurology service expecting a physiotherapist to assess patients referred with unexplained weakness and muscle atrophy; certainly the physiotherapist may have an important, specialised role in treatment, but the initial assessment should be by a physician, who will have a broad knowledge base, refined by training and experience.

Our patients present in complex ways and to reduce their assessment to rating scales, symptom checklists and risk management (as is currently the vogue) makes a mockery of the skills needed to practice psychiatry to an adequate standard. By delegating initial assessment to generic team members, the art of psychiatry appears to have been reduced to a ‘paint by numbers’ approach, that is anything but patient-centred. Looking at the fashion in which changes have been implemented, it is easy to make comparison with other Department of Health initiatives (such as the Medical Training Application Service/Modernising Medical Careers fiasco7). On this occasion, however, the College has the opportunity to effect change. The gauntlet has been thrown to the College to poll its membership on the implementation of New Ways of Working; this issue will not go away and needs to be resolved.


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Authors’ reply: We are pleased that our article has stimulated debate. This was our intention. We are disappointed that some correspondents dismiss our argument by attacking a stereotype of who they think we are or a caricature of what they think we might have said, rather than addressing what we actually did say. Such correspondents have missed, or ignored, the point of the article – namely, to ask whether the de-medicalisation that has taken place over recent years in British psychiatry is bad for the health of patients and the specialty. We believe this is a question that is worth taking seriously. It is clear from the substantial correspondence and other feedback that many psychiatrists share our concerns and wish for constructive debate.

This primary concern with the decline in medical standards of care and the deliberate politicisation of debates about service delivery does not imply that we cannot (a) embrace the importance of the full range of biological, psychological and social interventions for psychiatric illness and (b) value our non-psychiatric fellow professionals and their integral contributions to mental healthcare. We also believe to be self-evident that services should be informed by the experiences of patients, their relatives and carers, and that multidisciplinary teamwork is crucial for optimal management of psychiatric illness. We are not terribly interested in what is past. We are much more interested to look ahead.

Of the wide range of views expressed by respondents, we believe the voice of trainees and those contemplating a career in psychiatry should carry particular weight and we should like to hear more from them. They are the future of British psychiatry.

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Jed Boardman and Michele Hampson
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