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## **'PSYCHIATRY AND ALTERNATIVE SUPPORT PROGRAMMES'**

**MIND conference May 9 & 10 1975**

Morris Carstairs (Chancellor of York University) in his introductory address asked for more community involvement in mental health. He cited many examples from overseas where relatives look after patients in hospital with marked success. In this country he asked for devolvement from the professionals to the community, for less jealousy among professionals to allow more self-help, particularly involving those who themselves have suffered mental illness and who know the problem from the inside and are thus more able to help others similarly placed.

He did not say anything about proposed legislation to curb unqualified therapists who have set up groups and community houses.

I attended three discussion groups on the following:

1. York University Students Co-op, a self-help group to offer a friendly ear to any student in trouble, day and night, with a flat provided by the University. No professional advice or counselling is offered and more serious cases are referred. But even so many problems can be solved.
2. 'LIFT' is a self-help group of ex-psychiatric patients. Many are bewildered by the lack of direction offered to them on leaving hospital, lack of prognosis or where to find support, and this group has been able to fill this gap with frequent discussion meetings where personal problems can be shared.
3. COPE—a residential community of young people who feel that the established channels of help are of no use to them. Again, this is a self-help supportive group.

Bill Taylor, the final speaker, stressed the importance of community centres where such supportive help can be given. He pointed out that the Settlements have been doing this for nearly 100 years in London but of course they can only serve their immediate neighbourhood, and many more are needed. This reminds me of the talk about health centres when the National Health Service was being started many years ago, and which are still at the talking stage. Yet so little would be needed to get these

community centres going. Premises are available everywhere, volunteers can be found, and all that is lacking is encouragement from professional bodies and local authority departments. Even Dr. Owen, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health, paid lip-service to the idea of shifting resources away from University-centred professionalism typified by hospital psychiatric departments, and towards community health centres with para-medical staff. In times of financial stringencies we need to re-think our priorities, he said, and spread the skills we have. A shift in attitudes and awareness would be required at the same time.

And where does this leave us? We need to spread the ideas actively. We need to mobilise interest, energy. A small group of people met on November 3rd to see what can be done to put theory into practice. At first we found it difficult to agree on terms. Did we mean prevention of excessive stress, depression, loneliness, and did we want to find ways of making contact so that small groups of people could help each other with these problems? For instance, family groups can and do help young mothers with post-natal depression, and we do run clubs for those who have difficulties making new friends . . . but is this all we have in mind? Some of us wanted to get away from the social work mythology where one person helps another, the professional and the client, the therapist and the patient, the urgent need felt by some people to be of use, the need to help someone rather than to be helped in return.

But positive means more than prevention. Perhaps it could mean development, growth, movement - but movement towards what? Some of us at that meeting were open enough to say we wanted help, or at least we had an area of unhappiness. Some others said they wanted to explore themselves as well as each other. One young man eventually shared his idea of what he wanted: 'I want to find one person within walking distance to whom I can talk openly and who will listen to me, and who in turn will talk to me and I will listen to him or her. Then after a while,' he said, 'perhaps each of us can find one other person with the same idea and so this may grow . . . ' And this sparked off an agreement between us that we would meet fortnightly and bring one other person along who might be interested. In fact this would mean that we soon would have to split up and split again, drawing in more and more people, . . .

Anyone interested please get in touch: Hans Lobstein, 7 Chesham Terrace, Ealing, W.13.

**Hans Lobstein**

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## **Alternative Society**

### **What is Alternative Society?**

Alternative Society is first of all a group of friends who share a common purpose. That purpose is to create 'alternatives'; and alternatives are needed because many existing