

Conference Reports

1. The Independent Therapists Network

A longer article by Nick Totton about recent developments in the Independent Therapists Network will appear in the July issue of *S&S*. The following three reports describe participants' reactions to the day conference held in November to explore how the network might develop.

Mary Fee

I liked the structure of the day, with home groups, 'fishbowl' discussions and plenty of space for feedback. I felt that this allowed meaningful discussion within small groups and ensured that there was no stage at which people were cut off from the chance of saying something or had the power grabbed from them.

We were discussing the structure of the proposed network, how individual practitioners would form into 'cells' for peer-support and accreditation, how they could relate laterally to a number of other 'cells' for external accreditation, and whether this would be a valid and acceptable alternative to more hierarchical forms of accreditation. Not all those present had confidence in this new idea – one woman who ran a psychotherapy training school linked with one of these bodies declared herself several levels 'higher' than other people she might have to come into contact with, and whom she might have to 'therapise' in such peer groups. She dismissed the whole idea, her scorn hitting me almost like a body-blow, and did not re-appear after the lunch break.

During the debate it emerged that the nature of 'cells' might vary considerably from region to region. Some, like the Open Centre collective in London, would be working groups engaged in a variety of different modalities; some members in less populated regions might be working more individually and travelling to meet each other – in more remote locations some kind of teleconferencing might be necessary, or practitioners of a wider variety of therapies might want to co-operate together, perhaps forming 'natural health and therapy' centres.

The key issue which emerged from this discussion was the definition of 'therapy', and what exactly was being conveyed by the title 'Independent Therapists Network'. 'Maintaining the use of the term 'psychotherapy' which more orthodox accrediting bodies are attempting to monopolise, keeps alive a healthy confusion in the public arena where the good work can continue to flourish. On the other hand, using a less defined term like 'therapy' enables more holistic models of co-operation to be developed.

Jocelyn Chaplin

I arrived at the conference with a sense of hope that was actually enhanced during the course of the day rather than, as so often at such events, disappointed. The atmosphere of the first morning was relaxed and warm yet with a clear structure and sense of containment. Many of the people present were from outside London, especially from the north of England, which made a refreshing change. After a brief introduction we moved quickly into small groups of people from often widely differing backgrounds of therapy style and training. Then after a break we formed larger groups with different sets of people. By this time some anxiety was beginning to appear. However the level of this anxiety was minimal compared to the high levels I have experienced at other conferences since the issue of accreditation became so major. Peoples' fears on this day were around issues of leadership such as, 'Is there a secret hierarchy here?' 'Do we really all have equal say?' And naturally concerns about giving and receiving constructive criticism were also raised. Another issue was the relative priority given to playing an activist role in questioning the role of the UKCP and satisfying our personal and professional needs for sup-

port and validation. There was a lot of emphasis on integrity, excellent practice, commitment and rigour, and a keen desire to provide a valid, professional alternative to UKCP.

Some people felt that the cell structure given to us in the pre-conference literature was too rigid and idealistic. Geographical factors may not always make it possible for like-minded people to be in a cell together. Other people commented that while this was not going to be a highly centralised or oppressive organisation, we shouldn't be too afraid of hierarchies.

At the end there was a chance for people not already in cells to begin forming them, and for those who were to make new connections. This part of the day was inevitably rather chaotic, but I felt that there was always a sense of an organic order within whatever chaos there might have been. The day certainly ended with a general feeling of optimism. For many of us who had felt somewhat isolated in our misgivings about the present direction of the therapy profession, it seemed like a homecoming. We were no longer alone. There is now the beginnings of an organisation that fits with our beliefs and aspirations, that we can feel part of.

Mark Matthews

I attended the founding conference of the ITN on November 19th with great expectations. While I had a most enjoyable day and met some interesting people the meeting was so focused on the process that the content was virtually ignored.

The 65 founding members agreed by consensus that individuals could volunteer to do things, but that no individual could speak on behalf of the Network. Thus no formal resolutions or election of officers took place.

The intention of the initiators of the conference was to have membership based on groups of therapists, with five being the minimum size. That being the case it would have been better to name it the Association of Therapists Groups (ATG). With established groups such as the Open Centre such an association makes some sense, but to imagine that five strangers are in any way more reliable than an individual is a nonsense. To place the whole emphasis of a conference on such a flimsy supposition when there are real issues to be faced is frankly beyond belief – except that we all went along with it.

I believe the initiators of the conference to be honest, sincere people with the best of intentions, yet it could be seen as a clever way of creating a base for a training agency or of having enough members to apply to the UKCP. It is important to remind ourselves that the issue is really around earning money. That is not a criticism, but it is vital that this aspect be kept in mind. The Samaritans are constantly looking for volunteers for anyone who wishes to satisfy the need to help.

One of the reasons for setting up the Network is the fact that experienced, competent people cannot get accredited by other organisations. There are three reasons for being accredited. First, those who know what is good for us may pass legislation which prohibits practice unless officially recognised. The second is that NHS funds will obviously only be paid to accredited practitioners. The third is that some prospective clients seem impressed by letters after one's name.

I have been involved with the human potential movement for 25 years. The excitement of the early days I remember with great nostalgia. I had expected that excitement at the conference. If it was there I neither felt it nor noticed it. I left feeling frustrated. It seems to me that in their endeavour to avoid the weakness of a centralised hierarchical organisation they went too far the other way. They threw the baby out with the bathwater. They, in this case, being the initiators of the conference.

So why the ITN or ATG? I honestly do not know. As presently envisaged it seems to offer little protection to the vulnerable, whether they be client or therapist. There seem to be no aims and no plan to attract more people to use the services. Most therapists would welcome more clients, so it seems illogical not to address this matter right at the start.

The September 1993 issue of this magazine was truly brilliant and should be re-read by everyone who takes this subject seriously. Not only were the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship explored but there was also an example of the most dreadful practice. While it is important to get accepted the importance of experience rather than theory it is still vital that standards, however defined, must exist.

I feel it is too early to pass judgement, but the start of this new organisation was not auspicious. On a lighter note I do find that synchronicity is becoming an important part of my belief system and it may well be that my path is different to that of the initiators.