

DAY ON STATE REGULATION OF THERAPY ORGANISED BY CONFER

John Rowan

This was a very interesting day, with a great turnout filling the large room in the swanky building on Cavendish Square. The format for the day was simple. The eight speakers on the platform would respond to questions sent in in advance, after introducing themselves briefly. Then in the afternoon we would split into groups, discuss key questions, and report back.

The speakers were all well qualified and capable. First was Dr Lynne Gabriel of BACP, who spoke quite concisely about the BACP and its dilemma as to whether to support the HPC or not. For the benefit of those who have been in Borneo for the last year or two, the HPC is the Health Professions Council, whose precursor was the Council of Professions Ancillary to Medicine. It holds membership registers of numerous professions ancillary to medicine, all of which up to now have volunteered to be regulated in that way, with their complaints all dealt with by the HPC. Then this year the British Psychological Society was compulsorily swallowed up by the HPC, by Government decree. And the issue now is that the psychotherapists and the counsellors are to be compulsorily swallowed up by the HPC, next year or perhaps the year after, depending on what difficulties are encountered. Some psychotherapists and counsellors have expressed grave doubts about the HPC and its assumptions about their specialities, and have formed themselves into the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy against State Regulation. They have published a book called *Compliance? Ambivalence? Rejection?* outlining the reasons why they feel so strongly that the HPC is the wrong setup for their professions.

The second speaker was Prof. Darian Leader, representing the Alliance. He came across as a very intelligent, even erudite, critic of the HPC, and had some strong things to say in his answers.

Then came Julian Lousada, Chair of the British Psychoanalytic Council, who spoke in measured tones and seemed to see himself as the voice of reason. He made the point that his members did not generally think of themselves as part of the health professions, and certainly did not adopt a medical model of how to treat their patients.

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The next speaker was Professor Andrew Samuels, the newly elected Chair of the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. He was one of the founder members of the Alliance, and spoke forcefully and movingly about his struggles with the HPC. One of the interesting things about this day was the way in which the audience, forbidden for the most part to express their views, used the tool of applause to make it very clear where their sympathies lay. It was very noticeable that whenever Andrew spoke the audience clapped longer and louder than for anyone else.

The fifth speaker was Marc Seale, Chief Executive and Registrar of the Health Professions Council. He spoke very clearly and briefly, though he had a nasty habit of replying to criticisms by saying that the questioner had got his or her facts wrong. In most cases this did not appear to be true. So far as applause goes, he got very little.

Then came Professor Diana Waller, Chair of the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Professional Liaison Group of the HPC. It emerged that the agenda of the so-called Professional Liaison Group, which is always advertised as the place where professional issues can be discussed between the therapist groups and the HPC, was drawn up by the HPC itself, and was not open to admit issues raised by the subject groups. The items on the agenda were the issues of interest to the HPC, which the others could discuss.

And finally came Dr Michael Fischer, Research Fellow in Healthcare Management, Kings College London. He reported on a piece of research which had been done, but this did not give rise to many questions.

It was interesting to see the way in which most of the criticisms of the HPC by various speakers were rebuffed or diverted to the side by Marc Seale. Not once did he say anything like – "Well that is certainly worrying and I will see that it is changed." There was a strong sense of him listening and not listening at the same time.

After a break, in the morning, we were supposed to go back to the prepared questions, but the audience rebelled, and insisted on being heard. Microphones were produced, and a much better discussion emerged then.

The afternoon, where we talked in small groups, was quite interesting in terms of discussions, but it was not clear what would be done with the results fed back at the end.

My impression of the event that the day was very much worth while, in that it brought out all the issues quite effectively, but not particularly satisfying in reassuring any of us that the HPC was a genuinely listening organization.