
Reviews

Sexual Abuse and People with Learning Difficulties: developing access to community services. By David Simpson. Family Planning Association, 27–35 Mortimer Street, London W1N 7RJ. 1994. Pp 25 £5.99

The demand for counselling and help for people with learning difficulties after sexual abuse exceeds the supply. Several well-established mainstream agencies with skills and experience on issues related to sexual abuse exist but appear unaware or unresponsive to this group's needs. Thus a gap exists. This report describes a project which tried to bridge this gap by establishing local partnerships between advocacy groups and mainstream agencies.

The most important feature was the use of self-advocacy to enable the full participation of people with learning difficulties in its planning and transaction. Describing their experience and stating their needs powerfully challenged the investment of the agencies not acknowledging the gap. The increased awareness was emotionally painful for all involved. Attention had been paid in the planning phase to address this by allowing everyone time and space to process their feelings and reactions. The two day workshops ended with all participants setting action plans for themselves, identifying obstacles to change and how these might be overcome and evaluating the experience.

The outcomes were identified in a meeting held three months later. This showed that there had been changes in all involved in level of awareness, knowledge, action and local contacts. All participants said that the meeting with local people with learning difficulties had created the greatest change for them. This underlines the importance of personal contact and reflection to enable change.

The report also lists what the organisers themselves learnt from running the project. This included many practical aspects such as the use of audio-taped information and arranging transport for people with learning difficulties.

A very important consideration was how to balance the need to make the workshops as safe as possible for people with learning

difficulties without restricting contributions from other participants too much. This included providing individual support if disclosures about abuse occurred.

The report also contains very useful statements of how people with learning difficulties want to be treated and advice from them to mainstream organisations on meeting people with learning difficulties.

I highly recommend this brief, well written and presented report to anyone planning a similar exercise to establish a partnership between user and provider agencies. It is also a powerful reminder to providers of small specialised services of their important role in facilitating access and increasing acceptability of mainstream services for their users. The report reinforces the importance and challenges in getting out and establishing the effective partnerships which are needed in the community.

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It Could Never Happen Here!. The prevention and treatment of sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities in residential settings. Produced by ARC and NAPSAC with assistance from the Social Services Inspectorate/Department of Health

This document is based on information collected during a two-day workshop in 1993 organised by NAPSAC (National Association for the Protection from Sexual Abuse of Adults and Children with Learning Disabilities) and ARC (Association for Residential Care) and funded by the Department of Health and the Social Services Inspectorate.

The issue of the abuse of people with learning disability has only become widely discussed among professionals in the last five years. This document sets out clearly the implications of our current state of knowledge and the responsibilities of organisations which provide services for this group of people. Unfortunately, it only deals with sexual abuse, and although this may be the most

common type of abuse, it would have been helpful if it had also covered physical, emotional and financial abuse, and neglect. Also, it is confined to adults living in residential care homes whereas there is increasing evidence that the majority of abuse occurs in family homes where it can be extremely difficult to deal with. Neither does the document cover abuse in hospitals or other NHS settings where the role of social services may be less clear.

However, the document is clearly written and set out, and very user-friendly. It would be a valuable reference work as it contains some useful definitions, such as what constitutes sexual abuse and the criteria for meaningful consent to sexual activity. It specifies the responsibilities of the agencies involved, including the purchasing authorities and suggests ways in which multi-agency co-ordination should occur e.g. in the formation of adult protection committees. There is clearly laid out guidance for the investigation of abuse, although I felt the flow chart would have been more useful in the text rather than as an annex. I would challenge the assumption that social services will usually take the lead in any investigation. Although this is clearly recommended by the Law Commission, they do not always seem willing to do so in practice.

The final chapter consists of a checklist to identify what action needs to be taken to lower the risk of abuse and ensure a speedy and helpful response when it occurs. This would provide a useful reference point for all organisations involved in providing services for adults with learning disabilities.

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Individual and Community Responses to Trauma and Disaster. Edited by Robert J. Ursano, Brian G. McCaughey and Carol S. Fullerton. Cambridge University Press. 1994. Pp 442. £60.00 ISBN 0 521 41633 7.

The editors of this book are members of staff of the US Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences in Washington. Together they have an extensive experience of dealing with disasters of all kinds. The sub-title 'The structure of human chaos' encapsulates Ursano's view of the cognitive response to terror.

The 33 contributors represent very different experiences and models yet there is a remarkable degree of agreement and the

editors have achieved considerable continuity helped by their final overview. Shalev gives a good account of current views of debriefing following trauma while retaining a healthy scepticism about its effectiveness in preventing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ulrik Malt gives focuses on the neglected area of the traumatic effects of individual accidents and several authors deal with technological catastrophes. The chapter on long-term sequelae of combat in World War II, Korea and Vietnam brings together valuable material which deserves further study. Although purporting to cover the life cycle, children receive scant attention and I did not find the chapter on children in war particularly helpful when facing the traumatised children of Rwanda and the Sudan.

The concept of PTSD has come to steal the limelight when traumatic events are considered and the alacrity with which the concept has been embraced by lawyers and litigants has induced an attitude of great scepticism among British psychiatrists.

Yet a historical review indicates that all of the phenomena described in the DSM-III and elsewhere were known to the ancients and that emotional consequences of disaster are universal. They account for major problems of resettlement after community disasters and considerable distress and disability in individuals affected.

This book fills a useful role in detailing the variety of disasters and disaster responses. What we need now is a book on prevention and treatment of the adverse effects of disaster but I hope that we can wait until there is a sound research base for it.

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Relative Values: the differing views of users, family carers and professionals on services for people with schizophrenia in the community. By Geoff Shepherd, Alison Murray and Matt Muijen. London: The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. 1994. Pp 118. £10.00.

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health has published this 118 page document. The principal researcher was Murray and the 'project manager' Shepherd; Muijen's role is not clear. It is also not clear whether the results were subject to peer review before