

CORRESPONDENCE

'ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST'

DEAR SIR,

I would like to draw the attention of other psychiatrists to a recently released film entitled *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. For those who have not had an opportunity to see this film, let me just say that it portrays the transfer of a young man from a penal institution to an American State Mental Hospital for assessment, and follows his chaotic progress through the system until his death.

It is an extremely well-made and well-acted film in my view, so I will not impair other people's enjoyment of it by disclosing any further details of the plot. However, I am sure that those psychiatrists who have seen this film will join me in expressing considerable concern as to its influence on the general public in this country.

The hospital in question seems extremely backward by British standards; the wards appear to be closed, patients exercise in a closed 'airing court', very similar to those in our prisons, unmodified ECT appears to be used as punishment, and physical restraints are manifest everywhere.

One of the central characters is a nurse therapist of the most destructive and unpleasant variety, whose 'psychotherapy' can be seen to be persistently antitherapeutic. Members of the nursing and medical staff are at best portrayed as benignly inefficient, and the male orderlies act with a sickening indifference to the suffering of their patients. Only the antihero, a promiscuous psychopath with an

engaging appetite for Life, shows any feeling for his fellow-patients and is unwittingly a remarkably effective psychotherapist.

It so happens that on the occasion I went to see this film, the audience was largely composed of psychiatric nurses from a neighbouring hospital. However, friends have described to me how they have witnessed striking reactions to this film by lay audiences; and it seems to me that the general public may well regard this as an accurate picture of life in one of our own hospitals, despite all the favourable publicity that psychiatric hospitals have received in recent years. I am also concerned that the Scientologists and others similarly deluded may find fuel for their destructive attacks on psychiatry in this film, and may thus discourage some people in need of psychiatric treatment from seeking it. Similarly, it may directly discourage others, and greatly distress the relatives of current in-patients.

Whilst it seems to me that the film itself has such merit as to make it compulsory viewing for all those who work in psychiatric hospitals, I am most anxious that one of us should have an opportunity to discuss this film in public and make it clear that our hospitals do not function in this way. I have little or no contact with the media, but I intend to do my best to persuade someone to give us a proper public hearing, and would ask those of my colleagues with suitable contacts to do the same.

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