

15.2.92). Later, the *Sunday Times* made further use of what I said (11.10.92). Here is an example (supplied with the writer's interest and approval) of what people subsequently wrote to me:

"After a severe depressive illness 25 years ago, I could write a book about the tortuous road back to so-called normality, having run the whole gamut of drugs, ECT, psychotherapy and abreaction etc. In order, hopefully, to be helpful and not presumptuous, could I make a few suggestions:

1. Let the patient try and tell you *exactly* how he/she feels and never tell him you know how he feels – you can't, possibly!
2. Participating treatments are far more useful than passive ones – even if the patient has to be cajoled into cooperation. An anxious depressive will probably be far more cooperative.
3. If your patients are reasonably articulate, why don't you follow them up, a year or so after they have been well, and ask them about their experience – how they felt about their illness – how the illness itself felt – which aspects of treatment helped them and which they found distinctly unhelpful.
4. If they are not particularly articulate, they may find it easier (and, from experience, *very* helpful) to write down their feelings, however jumbled the final result may seem.

I write this entirely to give you suggestions from "the other side of the fence" and hope that maybe there is something useful."

Unexceptional suggestions, perhaps, but presumably things this very reasonable person did not find enough of in her long experience. Of course, different people may find different things helpful. Formal research and less formal audit may touch some of these areas, but only within the limits of the questions the *professional* chooses to ask.

May I suggest that, in its public campaigns, the College incorporates a genuine, open interest in receiving this kind of feed-back and advice, however much we may think it produces nothing we do not already do in our practice? Perhaps it should be a constant feature of specific campaigns like Defeat Depression, although why not a campaign of its own too? Wouldn't it be an impressive statement of the College valuing those who have been on "the other side of the fence" – indeed, it would show that psychiatrists seek collaboration not the divisiveness implied by "fences"?

I propose that the College – on its own, or co-operating with MIND and "user" groups – sets up a formal system to publicise the invitation, and then collects, edits, and publishes such correspondence into some easily accessible form. Perhaps there could be an appendix of references to other published subjective descriptions of the experience of mental health problems and their treatment (see Further reading, below, for examples)?

This project would certainly be a collaborative effort – both sides of the fence would equally find the result an extremely useful resource.

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#### Further reading

- GALLOWAY, J. (1989) *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing*. Minerva.  
PLATH, S. (1963) *The Bell Jar*. Heinemann; Faber.  
PODVOLL, E. (1990) *The Seduction of Madness*. Harper-Collins; Century.  
RIPPERE, V. & WILLIAMS, R. (Eds) (1985) *Wounded Healers: Mental Health Workers' Experiences of Depression*. Wiley.

#### Reply

DEAR SIRS

Dr Child proposes, *inter alia*, formal systems for responding to the views and the correspondence from patients. I am sure that he will be pleased to hear that the College already has measures in place for such purposes.

In the 1992 annual report of the Royal College of Psychiatrists there was an article on the Patients' Liaison Group. One of the aims of this Group was to make the College aware of patients' concerns, and it was to provide a forum for a continuing dialogue between psychiatrists, patients' groups and carers. The Group is chaired by Professor Brice Pitt. It includes representatives from a wide variety of patients' and carers' associations. The Group reports to the President, to the Public Policy Committee, to the Executive and Finance Committee and to Council.

Patients' letters coming to the College are replied to usually by Professor Philip Seager. Letters particularly concerned with the Defeat Depression Campaign are replied to by Dr David Baldwin.

I shall pass Dr Child's letter on to Professor Pitt, Professor Seager and Dr Baldwin, since they may wish to take up some of Dr Child's other interesting proposals.

R. G. PRIEST

*Chairman, Defeat Depression Campaign*

#### Training in psychiatry

DEAR SIRS

The dispute between the Maudsley consultants and Professor Copeland (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, 1992, 16, 798–799) about the training status of senior registrars seems old fashioned.