

EDITORIAL

MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME : NEED FOR REDEMPTION

During the pre-independence era mental health services in this country received only scanty attention. The administration was chiefly concerned with detaining the mentally ill within the high walls of mental hospitals and providing them a semblance of a minimum required treatment. Seeing the appalling conditions of the psychiatric services in this country, Bhore Committee was appointed on the eve of independence to inquire into the prevailing facilities for mentally ill and suggest methods of improvement. The committee had observed that most of the mental hospitals are manned by unqualified personnel and the quality of care being provided was poor. The committee recommended that a handful doctors be sent abroad for their training and subsequently proper training facilities may be provided at one or two institutions in India so that the acute shortage of trained personnel may be met. An important recommendation of the committee was that mental hospitals be attached to the nearby medical college so that a healthier and meaningful interaction could take place between the staff of psychiatry and other medical disciplines. Such a proposition was also aimed at improving the functioning of mental hospitals as well as providing proper exposure of psychiatry to the medical students.

Forty five years have passed and perhaps it has been overdue to seriously look into our achievements and failures with respect to the above. During the intervening period number of mental hospitals as well as bed-strength have almost doubled (hospitals from 30 to 45; beds from 10148 to 20674). But there has been a tenfold increase in the annual admission rate, presently touching a figure of 55,000. However, in a country with nearly 850 million population the existing facilities are quite inadequate and resultantly it is not uncommon to see chronic mental patients loitering in the streets. Perhaps nothing could be greater slur than this for a country claiming to be a social welfare state.

It may however be misconstruing to conclude that no progress of the discipline has taken place during all these years. Considerable achievements have been made to provide specialised education to the medical personnel in various parts of our country and at present there are nearly 40 institutions providing postgraduate training in psychiatry. In addition, large number of medical colleges and hospitals have started general hospital psychiatric units which are rendering professional help to the mentally sick. A great lacuna has however been with regard to that training facilities for para medical personnel. They are awfully inadequate although no comprehensive psychiatric care is viable without availability of these personnel.

The expectations of public as well as of those involved in the discipline were raised in 1982 when in a very spirited and exalted manner Government of India decided to grant mental health the status of a National Programme. To conceptualize and give a fillip to the programme a large number of workshop and seminars were organized and many important deliberations took place in those expert meetings. Despite best efforts of the professionals involved to carry on the programme, it failed to have any significant impact in majority of States. Needless to say, no meaningful programme could be achieved unless there is a strong political will to pursue. People's involvement may also be said to be equally important but there is no doubt that the infrastructure has to be first provided by the establishment to generate the need to utilize these services. Of course there could be many other potential reasons for the half-hearted progress in this field which should be looked into.

The foregoing makes it abundantly clear that except some marginal improvement in the specialized services for the mentally ill not much could be achieved as yet in the area of promotion of mental health or prevention of mental disorders. Most of the experts seem to view that it would never materialise unless there is a due thrust upon community psychiatry programmes. Regardless of indifference of society and policy makers as well as the age-old stigma attached to mental illness the professionals themselves can not be wholly absolved of their responsibilities. Perhaps it has been rather their inability to convince the policy makers towards the importance of these services which is to some extent responsible for the present state of affairs. Several studies have shown that nearly 2% people suffer from severe mental disorders and approximately another 10% have emotional problems. Be that as it may, nearly 85 million people in our country are in need of psychiatric help while with the available resources hardly one or two millions could be provided adequate psychiatric care. Distressingly enough, most of us have become rather reconciled to the existing situation, but the fact remains that the nation can never progress unless mental health of its people gets due attention.

There is somehow a wide-spread apathy towards the plight of psychiatrically ill persons. More often than not administrators and politicians put forward the plea of lack of sufficient funds and health priority areas being family planning and control of infectious diseases and malnutrition. It is intriguing that the decision makers could not be convinced as yet that the target programmes and mental health services are of a complimentary nature. Unless the emotionally disturbed people are given due attention, their approach to physical health in terms of diet, habits of cleanliness or even family planning cannot be thought to make a substantial impact.

Another factor associated with halting of the progress of psychiatry in this country is that of public perception of the discipline. Surprisingly enough, both layman as well as experts of other medical disciplines think that psychiatrist do nothing more than providing certain tranquillizing pills and indulging in peptalk with patients. This attitude has to undergo a sea change if the discipline of psychiatry has to develop in this country. For this purpose there is an urgent need to establish certain model treatment centres of psychiatry which should be equipped with the latest techniques and expertise. Of course these centres can cater to only a small number of patients but they should greatly help in transforming the image of psychiatry from a loose discipline to a scientifically precise and therapeutically effective. Further, there should be a greater focus on providing adequate mental health education to the public propagating the availability of modern methods of psychiatric treatment and emphasizing the bright prospects of recovery.

Since mentally ill people are not able to demand forcefully their right for treatment and to live as respectable citizens, it is the need of time that professionals should initiate effective pressure groups in the form of associations of the relatives of the mentally sick in each city, town and state which should lobby for the better care of these forgotten millions. The above-mentioned strategy should greatly help in sensitizing the decision makers towards the plight of mentally sick and mitigating the age-old unhealthy image of psychiatry in this country.

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