For Debate

Whom are we counselling?

J. Bahrami, MRCPG, FRCGP
General Practitioner, Bradford

For the past five years, I have been involved in organizing and running a five-day residential course entitled 'Counselling, listening and interpreting' in one of the most picturesque parts of North Yorkshire at the College of Ripon and York St John. The course is part of an annual educational event in the region called the Yorkshire Summer School. The following is a personal view of the achievements and the failures of such a course.

The course
The aims of the five-day residential course are to provide a learning experience in non-directional counselling of patients and to understand the essential skills of communication. The course, which is preceded by some preparatory work, consists of a series of short inputs by the tutors, augmented by daily group sessions. The principle of non-directional counselling is introduced experientially through working in groups of three (trios) on a real problem brought by a doctor. Some of these sessions are recorded on videotape for subsequent analysis and discussion. There are further sessions devoted to the study of communication skills and the review of video- or audio-tapes of consultations brought along by the participants.

The participants
Over the past five years some 200 doctors from all parts of Yorkshire have attended the course. Most of the doctors were trainees but, of course, some were established general practitioner principals. Their ages ranged from 25-60 years with almost equal distribution between the sexes. They came from different backgrounds and working environments and their reasons for coming on such a course varied. There were some who had chosen the course because of their increasing frustration with orthodox medicine which seemed inappropriate at times to the problems of general practice. There were other doctors who had come because of growing doubts about their choice of specialty and even career. Questions such as whether they were really suited to medicine or how they could continue in this state of helplessness and pretend they could help others seemed to arise frequently. Faced with such fundamental questions, it is easy to feel a certain degree of guilt about the inadequacies of our medical education in general and about career advice in particular. Inevitably, there were also those who arrived on the course with an attitude of open hostility to something which was not 'real' medicine. There were also a few to whom this was a challenge which had to be met even if only for curiosity's sake.

Appraisal
The five-day course is an intense emotional experience for the participants as well as the tutors but it is also rewarding. The concept of working together through a personal problem for four days and five nights generates a feeling of camaraderie and friendship which is felt most strongly between the members of the trios.

It is important to note that the course was never meant to provide a week of psychotherapy for doctors, but it is inevi-

References

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Address for correspondence
Dr J. Bahrami, Bradford Vocational Training Scheme, Field House Teaching Centre, Bradford Royal Infirmary, Bradford, West Yorkshire BD9 6JR.

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