

Yet, today, probably the principal objection to the Balint thesis is found in the existence of large and ill-defined groups of patients who require a great deal of attention from practitioners, hospitals, and community services. They include patients who never feel well, patients with personality problems, and social isolates—people with little or no ability to cope with life's simple demands and who lack adequate social (community and family) support. Recognition of their existence is not new in general practice but has only recently been recognized in clinical psychiatry, which was previously preoccupied with well-described major mental illnesses. They are now an increasing problem to psychiatric departments and hospitals. There are many of them, their condition is usually chronic, they are costly in terms of help and resources, and poor in terms of result. Furthermore, there is no evidence that either drugs or psychotherapy have anything to offer at all. They tend to stay longer in hospital than other groups, are more likely to relapse and be readmitted, and cannot easily be discharged without community support. They offer a major problem to the health service, which seeks to make admissions as brief as possible.

Was Dr Fry (1969) simply being pessimistic when he wrote: "The cause of many mental illnesses depends on unalterable personality and environmental characteristics and although it may be possible with treatment to make the two factors more compatible with fewer symptoms, less personal suffering and family distress, permanent cure is unlikely"? I do not believe so. I believe what he said to be acutely observed. This has nothing to do with sympathy, only with effectiveness and what we believe we can really do.

It would be nice to believe that we could radically alter the environmental aspect, that without even greater growth of the social services, communities could develop solutions within themselves which older and more primitive communities sometimes had; but the massive social intervention required might not be beneficial even if it were within our disposition.

T. A. MADDEN

4 Queen's Road
Peckham
London SE15 2PW.

Reference

Fry, J. (1969). *Medicine in Three Societies: a Comparison of Medical Care in the USSR, USA and UK*. Aylesbury: Medical and Technical Publishing Co.

Shepherd, M., Cooper, B., Brown A. C. & Kalton, G. (1966). *Psychiatric Illness in General Practice*. London: Oxford University Press.

AGE-SEX REGISTERS

Sir,

I thought you would be interested to know that, following your interesting editorial about age-sex registers (September *Journal*, p. 515) when you drew attention to the fact that a family practitioner committee had made use of the Government's Job Creation Scheme to establish age-sex registers for family doctors, I decided to see if there was sufficient support for a similar scheme in Cheshire.

The Manpower Services Commission were sympathetic to our ideas and we subsequently wrote to all the practices in Cheshire asking if doctors were interested in the proposal. The response from family doctors has been very encouraging and to date we have received firm applications from 66 practices (170 doctors), with 440,000 patients, for age-sex registers. A number of practices have already introduced age-sex registers themselves and when we have completed our scheme we estimate that over half of our practices and about 60 per cent of our patients will have the facility of age-sex registers.

C. W. PARR
Administrator

Family Practitioner Services

Cheshire Area Health Authority
28 Nicholas Street
Chester CH1 2PH.

DEPUTIZING SERVICES

Sir,

In the December *Journal* (p. 753) you reported a meeting of the Council of the College held on 17 September 1977, at which deputizing services were considered.

Two points strike me as questionable. First, paragraph four of the Report states: "It was felt to be important that the professional advisory committees were adequately representative of all general practitioners in the family practitioner committee area, so that the views and experience of general practitioners who do not use deputizing services could be readily available constructively to promote higher standards of patient care." Is it the opinion of the College that only practitioners who do not use deputizing services are in a position to give advice which would

promote higher standards of care for patients?

Secondly, in paragraph two of the Report it appears that Council concluded that deputizing arrangements made within a practice among a small number of practitioners were preferable. This, however, fails to acknowledge the fact that arrangements within a small group can never reduce the practitioner's commitment from 168 hours to anything approaching the national basic week of 38 to 40 hours. Of all of the protests from the grass roots of general practice regarding the problems of our contract, this point often causes great concern.

It seems possible that the only way to meet the requirements of these practitioners is to provide a tightly closed 40 hours per week contract, probably on a salaried basis, or alternatively to maintain the 168-hour commitment but assure, or indeed encourage, them to reduce their personal working and on-call hours to a level which is comparable with the national working week norm; and this can be done only by the use of large groups, or by deputizing services.

One would not question the need for a good communication system and good relationships between deputy doctors and principals, whether this be in a group or deputizing organization.

D. LYNCH

The Surgery
281 Hounslow Road
Hanworth
Feltham
Middlesex TW13 5JG.

ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

Sir,

Some speakers at the Annual Symposium of the College on 20 November 1977 reluctantly used the term 'immigrants', and rightly so. There is a significant change in the use of this word which has previously been widely used.

The Race Relations Board in the UK has suggested the term 'ethnic minority groups' and has warned that the term 'immigrant' or 'coloured population' may cause problems.

The pattern of disease may vary considerably in ethnic minority groups. Such groups now make up a sizeable part of the labour force of the UK.

B. A. QURESHI

32 Legrace Avenue
Hounslow West
Middlesex TW4 7RS.