De-institutionalising the mad

Book review
Barham, P (1992) **Closing the asylum.** London: Penguin.

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Peter Barham is a psychologist working in Britain, and writes from his experiences in that part of the world while also providing references to other western mental health systems. The book presents a critical analysis of the issue of psychiatric institutionalization as well as recent, and even earlier attempts at de-institutionalization. There is evidence of extensive research, providing information from different sides of the deinstitutionalization issue.

The book unfolds in six chapters with the first giving an historical perspective of the asylum and its apparent roles and functions in earlier British society. Interesting statistics reflecting bed occupancy rates and related data are presented, together with details of attempts to re-settle chronic patients in the community. The second chapter, titled, "Get back to your ward" (a phrase familiar to psychiatric hospital workers), focuses, inter alia, on real-life experiences with provocative extracts of patients' revelations about their feelings as "schizophrenics", their concerns regarding mental health care, and even their thoughts about their psychiatrists! Chapter three deals with the unfortunate social process that led to "the manufacture of lunacy" as described by Henry Maudsley in response to the government's offer to pay 4 shillings towards local authority costs for each asylum patient (or potential patient). The dehumanization of the mentally ill is sensitively discussed with reference also to the execution of thousands of mentally ill people as part of the extermination programmes of the Third Reich during the first half of this century.

The fourth chapter focuses on the fact that psychiatric hospital occupancy rates in both Britain and the United States declined even before the introduction of anti-psychotic drugs, suggesting an exaggeration of the role played by psychotropic medication in emptying the hospitals. The issue of diagnosis and the attitudes and prejudices of mental health workers are also critically discussed. Chapter five sets forth an interesting discussion of the social processes affecting mentally ill persons. Here, Barham provides an analysis of the social identities of "mental patient" and "person" and the transformations between these identities. Specific community mental health programmes in the United States are also critically appraised as well as the issue of legislated treatment orders for patients who are unwilling to accept medication.

The final chapter makes reference to pressure groups like SANE (Schizophrenia: A National Emergency) who have fought against the closure of psychiatric hospitals believing that a person with schizophrenia is "irretrievably mad and dangerous" and should not be let back into society. The book ends with the question of hope surrounding the issue of healthy de-institutionalization with the author casting a fair amount of responsibility into the political arena and not just the clinical and social contexts. Perhaps one of the central tenets of this book is to be found in the final chapter, with the author suggesting that "Deinstitutionalization implicates rather more than the administrative substitution of one locus of care for another, and invites a drastic reshaping of the ways in which we think about, describe and, in particular, relate to people with a history of mental illness."

In summary, Barham presents a comprehensive historical analysis of the de-institutionalization issue together with well grounded socio-political arguments that are bound to stimulate thinking on this subject, even if the reader has not previously contemplated the issue. The book makes excellent reading for all mental health workers and students of the field.