

Parliamentary News

(January to March, 1980)

Mentally Abnormal Offenders and the Special Hospitals

An exceptionally large number of questions were tabled during the period covered, including many by Mr Christopher Price. The following selection includes those answers which appeared to give worthwhile information.

The population of Broadmoor has been reduced from 811 to 721 since 1974. In all the Special Hospitals there are 17 patients under 18 and 40 over 65. The great majority of patients have been in hospital for less than ten years, but two at Broadmoor and 15 at Rampton have been resident for over 40 years. Most of the patients are detained under Sections 60 and 65 of the Mental Health Act, but some (especially at Rampton) were admitted under Section 26 or Sections 71-74. During 1978, 34 patients were admitted who had had a previous admission to a Special Hospital.

The nursing staff at Broadmoor number about 450, and between 40 and 50 resign each year.

There are 236 patients at Broadmoor and 142 at Rampton who have been recommended by their consultants for transfer or discharge. The difficulties in effecting transfers and the steps taken to overcome these were again referred to in ministerial replies; it was stressed that there is no general ban on transfer by COHSE or NUPE, and that difficulties are always local.

Benperidol and cyproterone have been prescribed for a few patients in Special Hospitals and in prisons, in every case after the date when the drug was authorized for use by hospitals or other practitioners.

Following police investigations, the Director of Public Prosecutions decided that no action should be taken on the allegations made about ill-treatment at Broadmoor, nor did the Secretary of State consider that any management inquiry was necessary. New rules concerning seclusion are designed to give more precision to the practice followed hitherto.

There are now nine interim secure units in England, but the establishment of permanent units is still fraught with difficulties.

There are 557 prison inmates who are considered to be mentally ill to a degree that would warrant compulsory admission to hospital; of these 347 were convicted or 'trainees' (*sic*; presumably 'detainees' is meant).

Children and Mental Handicap

Questions were asked about autistic and hyperactive children. As regards the latter, it was stated that there are probably about 11,000 children with this syndrome, or one in a thousand, a much lower rate than in the United States.

After the abolition of the National Development Group, the Department will continue to receive advice from public authorities, voluntary organizations, professional bodies, etc.

The report on conditions at Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton by the National Development Team (which is distinct from the Group) has been referred to the local AHA, and it was stated that some improvements have been made.

Treatment

In reply to questions by Mr A. Mitchell, it was stated on 20 February that in 1978 over 25 million prescriptions for benzodiazepines were issued, at a cost to the NHS of over £28 million. The Committee on the Review of Medicines has recommended guidelines on information, and has commented that the low addictive potential of these drugs is increased with high or prolonged dosage, especially where there is a history of alcoholism etc; severe withdrawal symptoms may occur.

A question about sterilization operations in psychiatric hospitals produced a negative reply, since patients are transferred to general hospitals for any such operations. Forty-four patients underwent psychosurgery in each of the years 1977 and 1978.

Miscellaneous

In reply to Mr Ashley it was stated that there are probably between 3,000 and 6,000 patients with *Huntington's chorea* in the country; it would not be practicable to establish a register of cases with a view to prevention.

The *Henderson Hospital* is being kept going for the time being by money transferred from the local secure units allocation.

Mental health hostels can continue to be funded jointly by health and local authorities, and for those run by voluntary bodies the previous limitation of grant support to seven years has now been relaxed.

A Bill consolidating the law relating to *residential homes* (including those for the mentally disordered) has received its second reading. Some members attempted unsuccessfully to call attention to the need for a tightening of supervision.

Fees and expenses for *Mental Health Review Tribunals* amounted to £88,000 in 1978-79.

No information was available as to the number of persons who are excluded from the *electoral register* because their only address is that of a psychiatric hospital.

Figures were given on 3 March for the numbers of *hospital nurses* (including psychiatric nurses) in each English Region and their proportion to the population. In 1978 this varied from 5.10 in the Oxford Region to 7.22 in the Mersey Region. There has been a steady increase since 1974 over the whole of England from 5.51 to 6.31.

ALEXANDER WALK