the distant past and who are only now seeking permission to talk about it. There is also an increasing number of adults who present with a history of recent abuse or, more worrying, who present with symptoms indicative of current abuse. In those who are non-verbal or who have limited communicative skills, management decisions often have to be made on these symptoms alone without knowing who the perpetrator is. To complicate matters, many ‘problem behaviours’ are often, rightly or wrongly, accepted as an intrinsic part of mental handicap, e.g. enuresis, rocking, compulsive public masturbation (Brown & Craft, 1989).

At present it is difficult to know how to begin to manage such a case. There is, understandably, hesitation at calling for police involvement, but in my experience of two cases, one recent and one on-going, the police have been extremely helpful (O’Hara, 1989). How we protect an adult with mental handicap after abuse is suspected is an enormous problem, and I would very much support Dr Cooke’s suggestion of an amendment to the 1983 Mental Health Act to enable guardianship to be used for such purposes.

On a slightly different point, it appears that the practice of ‘sexual abuse’ is the norm in large institutions for the mentally handicapped. By that, I mean that staff have often turned a blind eye to the sexual encounters of mentally handicapped residents of all abilities. To some extent, although many will have an intelligence quotient below 50 (and therefore considered incapable of giving consent), most are able to express an acceptance or rejection of sexual advances in their own limited way. This practice has not caused much of a problem until now. With the more able residents being discharged into small community homes, and a core of more dependent residents being left within the hospital, we are now in a position where ex-residents are visiting, explicitly to have sex with those remaining, outside of an actual relationship. Quite clearly our residents are being taken advantage of, and while there is often no resistance on their part, possibly because they are used to being treated in this way and enjoy the experience, not knowing any other form of affection or appreciation, professionals working in this field will need to be aware of this problem and the dilemma it poses. There should be a locally agreed policy for dealing with this problem, as well as abuse in general.

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References