Developing psychogeriatric services in Hong Kong

A. H. T. Pang, L. C. W. Lam and H. F. K. Chiu

Hong Kong is an international trade and finance centre situated on the southern coast of China, offering a unique blend of Western culture and Chinese tradition. With a largely private primary health care system, psychiatric services here have been predominately hospital centred. Following the 1992 Government Review of Rehabilitation Program Plan (Secretary of Health and Welfare, Hong Kong, 1992) development of community-based services has become the major local issue. Psychogeriatrics is the first sub-speciality to have achieved major progress in this area. Such a development illustrates how local psychiatrists faced the challenge of applying Western models to suit an Oriental population with a different socio-cultural value system.

Historical aspects

Traditionally, psychiatric patients over 60 were the responsibility of general adult psychiatrists. Two hundred long-stay beds in two wards were available in Kwai Chung Hospital (mental hospital) and Kowloon Hospital (general convalescent hospital) to provide institutionalised care for demented and chronic psychotic patients. In 1983, St James Settlement, a community centre jointly run by voluntary agency and the academic psychiatry department of the University of Hong Kong, was set up to provide weekly outpatient psychogeriatric assessments. No other specialised provision was available until the '90s. Following the joint report Care of Elderly People With Mental Illness by the Royal College of Physicians of London and the Royal College of Psychiatrists (1989), the first fully specialised psychogeriatric unit was set up in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. With the publication of the Green Paper on Rehabilitation, the Hong Kong Government allocated new resources for the development of medical services to the elderly. This was followed by the creation of three more consultant-led teams in the last three years serving different regions of the colony. Being...
the first and probably the most comprehen-
sive, we describe the Chinese University
psychogeriatric unit as an example of the
type of services being developed locally.

The Chinese University Psychogeriatric Unit
is headed by a senior lecturer, with a lecturer/
senior medical officer (post-MRCPsych trainee)
and two medical officers (pre-MRCPsych
trainees). They are supported by a team of
specialised nurses, occupational therapists,
physiotherapists, and social workers. They
provide services for the New Territories East
region with a total population of 750,000
(Census and Statistics Department, Hong
Kong, 1991). A multidisciplinary approach is
adopted with an emphasis on continuity of
care. Their services comprise the following.

**Hospital-based services**

In-patient facilities include an acute
assessment unit (six beds) at the Prince of
Wales Hospital. A sub-acute/convalescent (20
beds) and a long-stay (30 beds) unit are
situated at Shatin Hospital. A specialised
out-patient clinic with liaison services is
provided for the two hospitals. Referrals come
mainly from homes for the elderly, government
clinics, private general practitioners, casualty
department and ward liaisons. Patients are
admitted to the assessment unit for
observation, investigations and acute
management. They would be discharged or
transferred to the convalescent unit for further
rehabilitation as appropriate.

**Community-based services**

The catchment area consists of a mixture of
old villages and new satellite towns with a
population of 65,000 over 65. This far exceeds
the recommendations put forward in the joint
report (Royal College of Physicians of London
and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 1989).
To optimise resources, the community
outreach programme concentrates on
providing services to all 20 government
registered homes for the elderly and five day-
care centres within the area. Psychiatrists pay
monthly visits to assess and follow-up
patients. A survey carried out at 11 homes
for the elderly after six months showed a
decrease in out-patients and accident and
emergency attendance with accompanying
reduction in travel time for patients and
escorts. Carers’ satisfaction ratings were
high, mainly on improved communication
between medical and hostel staff, increased
morale and better knowledge on management
of elderly psychiatric patients. There was a
slight increase in hospital admissions,
probably due to increased awareness of
psychiatric problems.

**Education and training**

Being a teaching hospital, the unit provides
basic training for medical students and
recognised membership training for medical
officers. There is also an active in-service
training programme with multidisciplinary
 participación from all involved health
professionals. With the shift of emphasis in
psychiatric care to the community, public
education is also an important accompani-
ment to the service. Besides giving public
lectures and informal talks at community
centres, the unit organises a half yearly
course for the staff of homes for the elderly
on the management of psychiatric problems in
the elderly.

**Planning and development**

A psychogeriatric day hospital with transport
provided for patients is due in 1995. This fills
the gap within the service in providing a
smooth transition from hospital to
community. The community team will
expand to include a nurse and an
occupational therapist. It is hoped that a
multidisciplinary approach can be adopted
within the outreach service.

Major difficulties in Hong Kong are the lack
of social welfare provisions (Chiu, 1994). For
instance, there are an estimated 9000 awaiting
placement in homes for the elderly and a
further 5500 infirmary placement (average
waiting time is two to three years). With
limited manpower and resources, comprehensive psychiatric care for the elderly
will continue to be a challenge for local
psychiatrists. As Hong Kong faces her
momentous political change in 1997, and
community psychiatry in China is in its early
stages, this successful example of developing a
service based on a modified Western model
could offer important information for Chinese
policy makers.

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