



columns

obituary

John Anthony Whitehead

Formerly Consultant Psychiatrist, Brighton Health District

Dr John Anthony (Tony) Whitehead died, aged 77, in Brighton General Hospital on 23 January this year. He had worked into his 70s, and was devoted to the cause of older people with mental illness and supportive of anyone who was down-trodden, unvalued or misunderstood.

He qualified MBBS London in 1954 and moved quickly into psychiatry, gaining the Conjoint DPM in 1962. He was elected a foundation MRCPsych in 1971 and elected a Fellow in 1981.

He was energetic, quick-witted and generous, and joined eagerly into the revolution of psychiatric practice pioneered by Dr Russell-Barton and other colleagues at Severalls Hospital near Colchester, Essex, in the mid 1960s. Tony was a mere assistant psychiatrist at that time, but took a major responsibility in developing a service for older people. Within the hospital daily ward regimes were improved, bed numbers were reduced, and men and women were brought together with mutual benefit. Activities were organised that used the talents and time of staff, together with volunteers and relatives so that every day was structured and given purpose in place of the endless ennui. A day care facility opened the hospital to the hurly-burly of the outside world, and made the facilities and expertise of the hospital available

without the threat that all who entered would stay for ever. But the most significant innovation was work within the widespread 'community' of Essex and beyond, which constituted the catchment area of Severalls. Outreach included peripheral clinics but also, and most importantly, visits to old people in rest homes, nursing homes and their own homes, urban or rural. For me, as a visiting medical student, to learn of the activities of the community team and their former ambulance vehicle stocked with coal, kindling, clean bedding, soap, a shovel, mops and buckets, bread, milk and tinned foods, was wonderful. In this way, medicine was made available for the people who needed it, on their terms and in their own territory.

Tony moved on from Severalls to Prestwich Hospital near Manchester, where he was appointed consultant, and then on to Brighton. Here, he followed Klaus Bergman into what had been the world's first consultant post devoted to 'Psychogeriatrics'. In it he served psychiatry and the local community loyally for over twenty years. He was not an academic but possessed a gift for effective communication. His book *In Service of Old Age* was published under the Pelican imprint in 1969 and brought the potential and reality of community psychogeriatrics to public attention and informed professionals and policy makers.

Wherever he went, others were moved to do more than they had ever imagined possible. He made things possible. His achievements were reflected in publications where he was often joined

by co-authors who had contributed to a particular project. His 'Pelican' went into a second edition and he wrote a handbook for the clinical team. All his articles were short, pithy, sensible and unfailingly useful. The titles alone spoke of his sense and compassion: 'Prestwich overcomes the problems', 'Are they being served?', 'How not to drop bricks', 'Difficult people', 'Protecting patients with chronic mental illness'.

He spoke and wrote about service development: 'Geriatric psychiatry in the general hospital', 'Psychiatric-geriatric joint patient unit', 'Psychiatry as an emergency service', management: 'Psychiatric management: a good blend of the old and new', 'Griffiths: a retrospective view from 1990?', 'Management after Nodder', as well as about clinical syndromes. He drew attention to the 'Gaslight phenomenon' and was the psychiatrist who examined the Brighton series of eccentrics which gave us the Diogenes Syndrome.

His natural optimism and turn of phrase were a tonic to many. 'Where there's depression,' he would smile 'there's hope!'

The services he developed broke new ground. Where there remained deficiencies he encouraged a voluntary or independent organisation to fill the gap. If there wasn't a suitable or willing organisation, he invented one and gave it his energies, talents and resources.

Yet his greatest devotion remained to his family and personal friends. His sense of perspective was, like everything else about him, intuitive, unadorned and true.

David Jolley