

The College

The Special Committee on the Political Abuse of Psychiatry

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The aim of this article is to inform College members about the role and function of this important committee which has been in existence since July 1978. It is of interest to appreciate the events which led to its establishment.

Just as the free world was unable to accept the truth of the enormity of the horror of the Nazi holocaust when the facts began to percolate from occupied Europe, so the initial reaction in the mid-sixties to reports that Soviet psychiatry was being used for political purposes produced little interest and even frank disbelief. Since then, the determined action of a number of Western psychiatrists, including a small number of our own members, has succeeded in persuading their colleagues to shift from a position of scepticism which was particularly manifest at the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Congress in Mexico City in 1971. On that occasion the WPA took no action over the information submitted to it by Vladimir Bukovsky* in which he provided detailed documentation of the forcible detention in 'special mental hospitals' of six sane dissenters.

At the next Congress in Hawaii, in 1977, we witnessed the passing of the now famous resolutions condemning the Soviet Union for its abuse of psychiatry for political purposes, and the establishment of a WPA standing committee to monitor this form of abuse wherever it might occur.

Various informed organizations, including Amnesty International and the London-based Working Group on the Internment of Dissenters in Mental Hospitals, as well as individual members of the College aware of the Soviet situation had turned to the College from the early 1970's requesting it to take action over the growing numbers of cases of 'political' psychiatry. Initially the Public Policy Committee attempted to deal with these requests; then in 1978 the Council endorsed a recommendation of the Executive and Finance Committee that a Special Committee on the Political Abuse of Psychiatry be established to discuss these reports and make recommendations to Council. In view of the urgency of many of the issues under consideration and the recognized expertise of its members, the Committee is often empowered to act independently on behalf of the College.

Under the able chairmanship of Dr Peter Sainsbury, the Committee's members are Professors Sir Desmond Pond

* See his *To Build a Castle*, Deutsch, London, 1978.

and Kenneth Rawnsley, Drs Sidney Bloch and Gery Low-Beer, who are internationally recognized experts in this field, and Drs Phillip Connell and Sidney Levine representing the Public Policy Committee.

An initial document of importance with which we dealt was Dr Low-Beer's report of his 1978 visit to the USSR which provided us with first-hand information about victims of political abuse of psychiatry whom he had personally examined and also about contacts he had made with members of the Working Commission to Investigate the Misuse of Psychiatry such as Alexander Podrabinek (he was arrested last year whilst serving a term of internal exile because of his human rights activities). This Commission was an offshoot of the Helsinki Monitoring Commission.

Our Committee soon found itself in the vanguard of international action and in August 1979 submitted the first case to the newly constituted WPA committee monitoring political abuse. In order to fulfil the criteria laid down, the document of this first test case was meticulously prepared and submitted by our President in the prescribed manner.

One case, typical of the many brought to our attention, is that of Iosyp Terelya, a 37-year-old Ukrainian Catholic dissenter who has spent some 17 years in Soviet prisons, labour camps and mental hospitals; he is currently detained in the Dnepropetrovsk special psychiatric hospital in the Ukraine. Four further cases have since been submitted, and information has been received that the national psychiatric associations in several other countries (including Japan, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, and Germany) have now also submitted cases. Regrettably, the use of the democratic process to influence the conduct of totalitarian regimes can be ponderously slow and frustrating. But there is no doubt about the potential effectiveness of our efforts in insisting that the WPA should take action on allegations of abuse of psychiatry in the USSR, including the possibility of some form of sanction on its member society, the Soviet All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists, if there is no adequate response.

In November 1979 we had the opportunity to meet the President and Secretary-General of the WPA and the Chairman of the Monitoring Committee for an exchange of views.

Our Committee has been able to provide personal support to individual victims of 'political' psychiatry and has been in direct contact with them and their families and with

the authorities responsible for their persecution. This activity has been particularly important in the cases of colleagues who have suffered from their efforts to bring the abuse to the notice of the world. At the College Annual Meeting in 1979 a resolution was unanimously passed asking the WPA to extend the 1977 Honolulu resolution to include concern not only for those suffering from the abuse of psychiatry but also for individuals who are persecuted for opposing 'political' psychiatry. The most celebrated of our colleagues in this category are Alexander Podrabinek (the author of the book *Punitive Medicine*),** Semyon Gluzman, Leonard Ternovsky, Vladimir Moskalkov, Anatoly Koryagin, and Alexander Voloshanovich. These efforts no doubt helped to save Dr Voloshanovich from arrest; instead he was expelled from the Soviet Union early last year. Shortly after his arrival in Britain, in March 1980, he gave a press conference under the College's auspices organized by our Committee. We continue to do what we can for the others who are either serving sentences or face arrest.

As a recognition of the College's esteem, Dr Semyon Gluzman has by special decision of Council recently been elected a Member of the College; the American Psychiatric Association has also recognized Gluzman's courage in defending medical ethics by making him a Distinguished Fellow.

The Committee investigated the involvement of Professor Andrei Snezhnevsky, a past president of the Soviet All-Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists and one of the country's senior forensic psychiatrists, who had been honoured as a Corresponding Fellow of our College, in the abuse of psychiatry for political purposes. He was, for example, a member of the psychiatric commission which was responsible for the compulsory detention of the celebrated dissident, Leonid Plyushch. We recommended that he be invited to attend the College's Court of Electors to answer these criticisms, but instead he chose to resign his Fellowship in March 1980.

Through the work of the Committee the College is now one of the leading psychiatric bodies on the international scene trying to rid our profession of an inhuman form of persecution with which it has become associated.

We are in regular contact with national psychiatric

associations in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, France, Norway, Sweden and Japan who are all appreciative of our guidance and views and news of our activities. There is an increasing commitment to the organizing of a united professional voice in its campaign against forces which use psychiatry to destroy standards of human decency. This is particularly relevant when psychiatry is under threat from other sources and some of our own practices are criticised as being violations of human rights. It is, for example, important to differentiate between political abuse and the malpractices that are alleged to have occurred at Rampton Hospital.

Our Committee deals with the political abuse of psychiatry wherever it occurs, and allegations of such abuse in other countries have come under review. Some colleagues have been the victims of the regime in Argentina and we benefited from first hand information following a visit by Dr Low-Beer in 1978. Although there is cause for considerable concern, this seems to be part of a widespread policy of repression in that country, and psychiatrists do not appear to have been specifically discriminated against. There is some evidence that Rumania is practising an abuse similar to that in the USSR, but the dissident movement is less well organized and details about cases are harder to obtain. In South Africa long-term psychiatric care is in part provided by privately-operated hospitals funded from Government sources. An American Psychiatric Association commission in 1978 visited these institutions and published a critical report indicting the authorities for providing inferior care for black patients. Dr Sidney Bloch, who also visited some of these hospitals in 1978, formed similar conclusions. This form of discriminatory treatment is not considered to be primarily political but will be kept under continuing review.

The work of the Committee continues, and it is clear that much still needs to be done. Much has already been achieved and the College has been recognized as making an important contribution to the world-wide campaign of increasing concern over 'political' psychiatry; this may encourage governments, particularly that of the Soviet Union, to rethink their policies. Our work has also helped to secure the release of several dissenters unjustifiably detained in hospitals. The establishment by the College of the Special Committee offers effective testimony to the words of Edmund Burke, 'All that is needed for the spread of folly is for wise men to say nothing.'

** Karoma, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979.