

Long term psychotherapy in context: treatment of choice?

The significance of human and humane relationships to the well-being of people is evident at all levels: in social trends, community living and personal relationships.

In the 1950's there was an urgent need for cheap, quickly built housing. The resulting concrete jungles seemed to undermine the residents' sense of community and personal identity as shown in the appearance of graffiti, vandalism, street crime and the numbers of people developing clinical depression, and increased rates of suicide. The estates were expensively demolished over the next two decades and replaced with more humane living spaces which were more expensive and required much more careful planning and understanding about people's individual and community needs.

Research undertaken in hospitals, also in the 1950s, identified that the TLC of the nurses and the relationships they developed with patients as one of the main factors which speeded the recovery of patients.

For some time there has been a growing body of research showing that the quality of relationships from birth onwards influences the personality of the growing child and that the lack of healthy relationships in later life causes depression and other mental illnesses.

But society seems to be forgetting these lessons.

Changes in public services seem to be increasingly driven by political and economic imperatives to prioritise economic considerations over human needs, particularly for personal exchanges with other people. For example, there is a trend towards

replacing an assistant with a computer screen at the supermarket check-out; telephone calls to companies increasingly involve speaking to voice recognition machines rather than communication with another person; many local shops and post offices have been closed, shutting down with them the one reason why many elderly and vulnerable folk may get out of the house and make contact with other human beings. It is as if economic realities, as fundamental as these are, often trump all other needs with profoundly de-humanising effects: time needed for human interaction, recognition, thoughtfulness and concern is often deemed too expensive.

The question in the minds of psychoanalytic psychotherapists

Is modern provision for people with psychological and emotional difficulties going the same way as post-war housing and today's supermarkets i.e. to get as many people through the system as fast as possible for the lowest cost?

Many patients who ask APEL for help are effectively saying that as a result of failures in past relationships, perhaps their earliest relationships, they are having serious difficulties with their current relationships. Consequently they are miserable, anxious, depressed, suffering from physical illnesses and mood swings and so on. Help with this can begin as patient and therapist develop a particular trusting relationship. Over time, the same external difficulties begin to arise within the therapeutic

relationship: as these become conscious, and are thought about and understood, change becomes possible. But providing an environment where such a relationship can develop takes time: there are no short cuts. Like post war housing, trying to do it on the cheap often ultimately costs more. Sometimes brief, problem-focused interventions work well, and patients go away feeling able to get on with their lives. Unfortunately, on other occasions it compounds the problem because it turns out to be repeating something which happened earlier in life when no-one took the time necessary to really understand what the matter was.

One of the problems of trying to measure the cost effectiveness of

treatments that (like psychoanalytic psychotherapy) require a trusting relationship to develop between two people, is that in many ways every patient is unique and every treatment different. Applying marketing values to assess the needs of vulnerable people is in danger of dehumanising people.

A society which appreciates the value of therapeutic relationships would be a society which recognises that this costs time and money but is worth the investment for the social and individual rewards.

In psychoanalytic therapy, the patient meets in the therapist someone who is interested in getting to know them as whole people, as they are. This can be a profoundly humanising experience.