



## Voices of experience

### Partners in healing:

#### perspectives on the experience of psychiatry

Alan Eppel, Judith MacKay, Sheryl Pederson, Tünde Szathmáry, et al

McMaster University Press, Hamilton; 1999  
207 pp. \$19.95. ISBN 0-920603-50-5



The stated purpose of *Partners in Healing* is not only “to give expression to the different perspectives of psychiatrist, patient and family member” in mental health care but also to venture beyond these differences to “the similarities, the essential humanity of all participants — for are we all not vulnerable and do we not all become patients in time?” I found this an exciting and inspiring proposition and read the book eagerly to see if it articulated my own wishes and thoughts.

This collection apparently arose from the experience of the representatives of different interest groups working together in the Provincial Advisory Committee on Mental Health. The Ontario Ministry of Health invited them in 1992 to grapple with the issues of fragmentation and lack of continuity in the delivery of mental health services, particularly for patients with serious psychiatric disorders. It sounds as though the group was composed of people who would not ordinarily expect to find that sitting together and discussing their views can be a bonding experience. However, it also seems that the group members were able to listen to one another and respect what they describe as quite disparate views. This is certainly an important achievement in wrestling with the problems of mental health care, and one of the useful outcomes to flow from the group was this volume.

Nevertheless, for me it was a hard book to read — but not because of its configuration and style. It is well put together, with several short essays collected under seven headings: the psychiatrist-patient relationship; boundaries, rights,

and responsibilities; families and mental illness; the stigma of mental illness; treatment modalities; self-help; and the way forward. The three major stakeholders in mental health care — consumer/survivors (to borrow the book’s terminology), their families, and psychiatrists — take turns addressing issues relevant to their shared goal, namely to help improve the mental health of the patient.

My feelings were sometimes churned up by this book; I often found myself thinking, “Yes, but ... .” On reflection, I realize that this was for several reasons. As a psychiatrist I want to be useful to my patients and their families. It is hard (but very necessary) to hear that patients and their families have many concerns about how my colleagues and I do our work. I wanted to make excuses, to point to the difficulties and, more particularly, to the ways in which the system itself leads to the problems they identify. I wanted to blame The Mental Health Act, fee-for-service payment, the lack of inexpensive housing, and so on, rather than looking at my own role. I think, too, that this book taps into the inevitable discomfort inherent in the experience of being a mental health worker — the discomfort of combining a positivistic model of disease with the need for informed, contextual but nonetheless subjective interpretation — and the difficulty of respecting and keeping a patient’s confidentiality without excluding and alienating family members. Alan Eppel’s wise and informed chapters both validated my reactions as a psychiatrist and helped me continue to listen to and read about the pain and invalidation voiced by patients and their families. I reminded myself that, in

my own practice, listening to the criticisms of my patients and responding to them almost inevitably leads to a better relationship between us. It is equally clear that if we, the three stakeholders, cannot speak of our concerns openly and trustingly we will not be able to improve on the mental health care system.

However, this book also demonstrates one of the difficulties in writing in a general way about personal experience: where specific examples are lacking, the essays tend merely to extol motherhood. Most people have some understanding of the hardship that stigma imposes on people, the struggle of families who find that the system doesn’t help, the effort involved in caring for someone with a serious condition, or the pain and helplessness of patients whose values and perspectives are not included in their “treatment plans.” Where examples are given or, as in some cases, whole chapters are devoted to a specific personal experience, the book comes to life and the ideas and directions for change are relevant and compelling. Most moving for me are descriptions in which a combination of experiences are brought together in one voice. The description by Reid Finlayson, a psychiatrist, of his own experience as a psychiatric patient brings home the courage it takes any patient to face candidly his or her experience.

The task of reforming mental health care is a complicated one. This book goes some way in giving voice to the most silenced of the groups involved and, through the courageous recounting of personal experience, encourages all of us to bring our most authentic voice and ears to the table. We also need compassionate intelligence and an awareness that the roles of psychiatrist, patient and family are not as compartmentalized as we sometimes think as we strive to solve more of the difficulties in mental health care today.

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