

STUFF AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON

A study of the aspirations of long-term community care patients with psychiatric problems revealed that an ambition to work is a powerful factor in many of their lives. Peter Bates explores the service implications

Innovative community care services are starting to take the ambitions and dreams of their clients seriously and to work towards their fulfilment.^{1,2}

This strengths-based approach recognises the importance of goals and targets in gaining a sense of achievement and self-worth.³ But mental health professionals can find many reasons for dismissing clients' aspirations – dreams of independent accommodation, personal relationships, employment and freedom from poverty – as 'unrealistic', 'stressful' or 'symptoms of illness'.

Do long-term clients of community care services hold on to their dreams? I checked out the circumstances of 77 day centre clients and compared them with a local employment service survey of 1,358 people who had been unemployed for at least six months and had been questioned about their ambitions for gaining paid work.

Forty-seven per cent of the day centre clients said they wanted help returning to work, compared with 51 per cent of the sample of unemployed people. I found this remarkable for a number of reasons.

First, the day centre clients had been in contact with psychiatric services for an average of 21 years, yet the two figures are comparable. Second, 53 per cent of the day centre population were over 50 years old compared with 11 per cent of the unemployed population, and it might have been expected that many day centre clients were preparing for retirement and not expecting to work again – especially as the survey showed older people had more literacy and health problems, fewer qualifications and longer periods of unemployment. Third, the unemployed people were interviewed in Benefits Agency offices, where claimants had an incentive to demonstrate they were actively seeking work and were eligible for benefits, while almost all the day centre clients received incapacity benefits which would be reduced if they proved themselves capable of holding down paid employment.

The survey also examined the lengths to which people would go to get work. Sixty-four per cent of the day centre clients said they would accept £150 a week or less, compared with 54 per cent of the unemployed group, even though a third lived in hostels where charges are high. Clients might lack an awareness of the cost of living, but this was unsupported by research evidence from this questionnaire and needs to be tested.

Only four day centre clients had a car, compared

with 21 per cent of the unemployed group, and only 17 per cent were willing to spend more than an hour travelling to work, compared with 32 per cent of the unemployed population.

Educational performance was also compared for day centre clients and those in the unemployed group who had been out of work for over two years. Seventy-three per cent of the day centre clients had no academic qualifications, compared with 77 per cent of the long-term unemployed people. Eighteen per cent of day centre clients had literacy or numeracy problems, compared with 15 per cent of the unemployed people. Some of the day centres offered literacy and numeracy classes, so clients may have been more willing to acknowledge this problem. At the other end of the academic scale, 8 per cent of the day centre population had A levels or higher qualifications, compared with 4 per cent of the long-term unemployed people.

One might expect that people who have been out of work for a long time would use any illness or disability as an acceptable explanation for their unemployment, and that since the day centres were run by the NHS, clients would acknowledge a health problem. Nearly a third of day centre clients said they did not have a health limitation that affected access to jobs or training. Another 31 per cent

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wanted help with a health problem to enable them to return to work. Working on images of health, and their implications, could be fruitful territory for mental health services.

What are people's ambitions for the nature of employment they undertake? Of those day centre clients who had previously worked, two-thirds had worked in relatively undemanding jobs (standard occupational classification groups 6-9), but only a third had no aspirations to advance beyond that level. By contrast, half the unemployed group had experience of relatively undemanding jobs and the same proportion had no aspiration to advance beyond that. Some of the day centres offer craft workshops and the opportunity for clients to develop skills, which may nurture aspirations and dreams.

Conclusion

While there needs to be more work considering the specific needs of this client group, my brief investigation shows that an ambition to work is a powerful factor in many clients' lives. This matches research over the past 60 years showing that employment has a wide range of social and personal advantages, while unemployment is unpleasant and correlates with increased take-up of health and social care services.^{4,5}

It is a curious organisational blindness which prevents many health and social care agencies seeing this reality and providing adequate resources to address the issue.

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