

Mental Health Services in Malta - 1994

Dr Joseph R. Saliba, M.D. MRCPsych(T)
Director of Psychiatry

Mental Health problems are common in medical practice. In general practice as many as one consultation in three may involve psychological problems and about a third of medical and surgical in-patients will show significant psychiatric morbidity. Although few doctors will enter psychiatry, the majority of psychiatric problems are dealt with by general practitioners in the community and specialists in other fields. It is therefore important for the medical undergraduate to be well versed in psychiatry, to know when and how to refer and to be familiar with the range of psychiatric facilities.

Although it is recognised that mental health services should as far as possible be community based, in Malta services are still largely hospital based. The main psychiatric hospital is Mount Carmel with approximately 700 beds. There is a short-stay 10 bedded psychiatric unit at St Luke's Hospital with adjacent Out-Patient facilities and psychiatric follow-up is also offered from four community based Health Centres. Finally there is a psychiatric team in Gozo with limited in-patient facilities. Services are offered through consultant led multidisciplinary teams comprising psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, occupational therapist and psychiatric nurses.

Mount Carmel Hospital

Mount Carmel Hospital remains the main base for psychiatric services in Malta. This old mental hospital was built in the mid 19th century and although at the time intended to be a modern hospital it later transpired that it was an exact replica of Wakefield Asylum in England and there are doubts as to whether the architect who provided the plans was truly an architect.

Mount Carmel Hospital is divided into male and female divisions. On either, there is an acute admission ward (M.W.2, F.W.6) where new admissions are received, secure wards (M.W.10, F.W.10) for more disturbed patients, locked chronic wards (M.W.3A and B, F.W.5A and B, M.W.7, F.W.7), open chronic wards (M.W.6, F.W.3), subnormality wards (M.W.8, F.W.8) and a medical/geriatric ward (M.W.5, F.W.2). In addition there is a small alcohol rehabilitation unit for male patients. Outside the hospital gates are a half-way house and hostel for rehabilitation and reintegration of patients into the community. There is also a Young People's Unit for treating disturbed adolescents and a residential unit for mentally handicapped males anomalously called the Juvenile Ward (dating back to the time when these men were indeed juvenile).

The services are offered through four psychiatric firms. In addition there are social work, occupational therapy and psychology departments and where staff numbers permit, members of these departments are deployed with psychiatric firms. The respective structure and function of these various departments are enlarged upon elsewhere in the guide book.

The aim of the hospital is to offer therapeutic admission to patients who either by virtue of the severity of their disorder or otherwise require residential treatment. Depending on the nature of their disorder they may require transfer to a more appropriate unit and unfortunately, despite multidisciplinary team management and rehabilitation, a significant minority of patients still become chronic and require long term admission.

On the other hand there are a number of patients whose illness has run its acute course and "burnt out" who could survive in the community with appropriate back up support,. Unfortunately, to date, community residential facilities are still lacking.

St Luke's Hospital

The ten bedded psychiatric unit at St Luke's Hospital functions as a short stay unit admitting patients for successive seven-day periods up to three or exceptionally four weeks. It is a mixed open unit only equipped to deal with voluntary admissions. Patients requiring compulsory admission have to be referred to Mount Carmel Hospital.

Adjacent to the psychiatric unit at St Luke's Hospital is the Psychiatric Out-Patients Department which on one day of the week functions as a Child Guidance Clinic.

Health Centre Clinics

Psychiatric follow-up is also carried out from four community based Health Centres situated in Floriana, Gzira, Mosta and Paola. Small teams consisting of psychiatrist and nurses from the individual firms visit these Health Centres in rotation. Ideally it is envisaged that these Health Centre Clinics would develop into community psychiatric teams, however, at present they function mainly for monitoring of patients stabilized on long term neuroleptic therapy with limited facility for nurses to visit patients who have lapsed their appointments.

Gozo

There is one consultant psychiatrist in Gozo supported by a team of nurses operating from a small unit at Gozo General Hospital and a small psychiatric hospital at Xewkija. There is also an Out-Patient Drug Dependence Service. there are plans for significant expansion of psychiatric services in Gozo including a brand new psychiatric wing.

Future Plans

The Mental Health Service is in the process of being reformed and Malta has recently signed a bilateral health agreement with Belgium. Various training seminars are to be organized in conjunction with Leuven University and the Brothers of Charity and Malta has been awarded a Med Campus grant to assist in the process.

The Mental Health Service reform will entail developing community services including day centres, a day hospital and community residential facilities and strengthening to community multidisciplinary team. Acute services will also be transferred to the Karen Grech site of St Luke's Hospital. It is intended that these measures will result in a significant bed reduction at Mount Carmel Hospital, however the latter will still continue to function as a smaller modernised hospital for the foreseeable future.