

THE ROLE OF THE CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST
IN THE MANAGEMENT OF
PSYCHIATRIC PATIENTS IN MALTA

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The Clinical Psychologist in Malta is expected to be an M.A. graduate in Psychology, and as such registered by the Board for the professions supplementary to Medicine.

The main functions of the Clinical Psychologist include:-

- (a) Assessment and diagnostic testing of patients with psychological deficiencies and deviations
- (b) Therapeutic and educative role in changing attitudes towards the processes of learning, behaviour modification and therapy, and in generating increased awareness of the role of non-professionals within the therapeutic milieu.
- (c) Preventive role, whether primary (improvement of quality of life), secondary (active case finding) and tertiary (reduction of relapses and recidivism while preventing any chronic disease and hospitalization).

To this end the Clinical Psychologist works with individuals, with their families, with carers and service systems to formulate problems and questions in psychological terms and to identify and implement ways of dealing with these problems. This includes psychological therapy on an individual, family or group basis; guidance on rehabilitation; training and support to carers and other professions.

The therapy with individuals and groups is meant to help the patients improve their sense of well-being, alleviate their distress, resolve their crises and increase their ability to solve problems and make decisions.

Most of the work is done outside Mount Carmel Hospital. The Clinical Psychologist helps those persons who come to consult at the out-patients clinics, to cope more effectively with normal life cycle developmental issues, such as relationship breakdown, career change, redundancy, loss and bereavement, and illness.

Clinical Psychologists use a range of approaches and skills including humanistic, psycho-dynamic and cognitive-behavioural. They also employ skills of assessment and testing.

The present system is such that an individual has to approach the General Practitioner first. The latter refers the patient to the Consultant Psychiatrist, who assesses and refers to the psychologist for assessment, testing and/or therapy. This system helps protect the very few psychologists available within the Health Department, but it also inhibits persons who are scared of being stigmatised as "mentally ill persons" who, as a result never approach the Psychologist even though they could benefit from such a service.

The Maltese people are becoming increasingly aware that psychological intervention can help them change and grow. As a result the Clinical Psychologist is constantly being called to give lectures to various groups. The public is also being educated through the media. Frequently the Clinical Psychologist is asked to give talks on a radio/TV station interested in providing such a service to its listeners/viewers.

The Department of Psychology at the University of Malta often calls upon the Clinical Psychologists, working within the Health Department, to lecture groups of students studying Psychology. This is an excellent means of sharing with the future professionals the fruit of research and empirical data.

At present the degree of involvement with institutionalised psychiatric patients is very limited due to the fact that the few psychologists employed with the Health Department are being stretched in every direction. Hopefully, this situation will improve considerably when more psychologists are trained to work with psychiatric patients.