The Origins of Community Mental Health in Australia: Mental Health Professionals, Activists, and Consumers Developing Alternatives to Mental Hospital-based Services

Hans Pols

Starting in the 1960s, large numbers of patients in Australia's mental hospitals were released even though there were hardly any support services in the community. By the 1970s, a small number of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, mental health nurses, mental health activists, and consumer advocates were building alliances and coalitions with to realise change, supported, at times, by politicians and health bureaucrats. I analyse the modest beginnings of community mental health services in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s as exemplified in the activities of mental hospital auxiliaries and associations like the Association of Friends and Relatives of the Mentally Ill (ARAFMI), MANDA (the Manic and Depressed Association), the Richmond Fellowship, the Schizophrenia Fellowship, and several others that later become non-government organisations within mental health. I pay special attention to Crisis Intervention Teams and Community Outreach Teams. Striking in all these initiatives is the cooperation and collaboration between consumers of mental health care, various mental health professions (social work, mental health nursing, occupational therapy, psychology) and social medicine activists. During the 1980s, Australia was a leader world-wide in community mental health, attracting many visitors from abroad. Today, most of these initiatives have been curtailed and even abolished. I end my presentation with providing reasons why this happened. I argue that community mental health services are well-placed to fill the "missing middle" in Australian mental health services because they are placed in between psychiatric wards in general hospitals and psychiatrists in private practice.