The Mental Health Act Commission Tenth Biennial Report 2001–2003

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Reviewing published work requires a particular form of discipline and is perhaps a responsibility

that should be more widely distributed. It necessitates and requires attention to detail in reading

which, in the modern era of information technology and preoccupation with circulating copy

correspondence, data and reports, particularly in the present day health service, may not always be

possible to achieve elsewhere given the sheer volume of material that each of us seems to be

required to assimilate. On the upside, however, one learns so much more than perhaps one might

otherwise. That said, for anyone with even half an interest in mental health law, and certainly

readers of this Journal, the *Mental Health Act Commission Tenth Biennial Report 2001–2003* should

not pose any sort of difficulty in terms of information overload. Even if one finds oneself at odds

with some of the views put forward or recommendations made, and there are no fewer than

seventy of the latter, there is no doubt that this book, for that is what it is, is well written and

constructed, wide-ranging, clearly thought-through and both stimulating and challenging to all

those involved with the operation, management or provision of mental healthcare services at

whatever level, from hospital wards staff to Government Ministers. I confess readily that to an

academic forensic psychiatrist with a major area of interest in mental health law, like myself, it is a

fascinating and absorbing piece of work.

The Report has as its sub-heading *“Placed Amongst Strangers”* which are words taken from John

Perceval’s 1840 description of his own confinement with mental health problems written in the

early part of the reign of Queen Victoria. The quotation from his work entitled *“A Narrative of*

*the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman During a State of Mental Derangement”* is both apt and well chosen and, albeit regrettably, may still today ring true with many who have been involved, in

whatever capacity, with those detained in hospital against their will under compulsory legal powers.

The principal author of the 2001–2003 Report, as stated at the outset is, as in previous years, Mat

Kinton of the Commission’s Policy Unit[[1]](#footnote-1). He is to be congratulated once again on the production

of such an important document, and on this particular occasion, at so crucial a time in the history

and development of Mental Health related law in the UK. As the Chairman, Professor Kamlesh

Patel, says in his Foreword, the Commission itself is set for change, and we now have the *Human*

*Rights Act 1998*, and the *European Convention of Human Rights*, both hugely influential and

important in relation to the operation of the Mental Health Act 1983 and other, allied, legislation.

In addition, with the judgement in R *(Munjaz) v Mersey Care NHS Trust[[2]](#footnote-2)*, the status of the Code of

Practice[[3]](#footnote-3) has changed in a way that quite rightly makes it so very much more important, even than

previously, in day-to-day clinical practice. There will of course also, and almost inevitably now, be

new legislation, probably at least in its preliminary form sooner rather than later. Not only that but

there has been a huge increase in case law rulings relevant to the field of mental health law in recent

times, so much so that the Report suggests, probably correctly, that practitioners, in attempting to

use the 1983 Act, may have come to feel overwhelmed by the various changes that have been made,

even to the point where, as the Commission points out, some seemingly well and long established

previous judgements have actually been reversed. One of the other very striking things about the

content is the number of times reference is made to cases still being heard, awaiting definitive

judgements or simply unresolved “at the time of going to press”. So this Report necessarily covers

a huge range of issues encompassing recent change and future potential developments.

In the past the issue of the statutory remit of the Mental Health Act Commission has been raised

in relation to the scope of its previous Reports[[4]](#footnote-4). I would not be so concerned. Now, as then, the

2001–2003 “edition” covers a vast area and goes well beyond just the description and presentation

of figures for the number of compulsory admissions to hospital or episodes of Second Opinion

Appointed Doctor involvements in issues relating to consent to treatment or indeed the day-to-day

operation of the Commission itself, its various constituent parts and its individual members and

employees. And it is this, to my mind, that makes it of most interest. It remains, of course, vital

that good quality data relating to the operation of the Mental Health Act are collected and

analysed critically and that all the other required duties, functions and responsibilities of the

Commission are comprehensively and properly fulfilled. That, one has to assume, goes without

saying and would not be a matter for dispute. What the Biennial Report offers in addition,

however, is an opportunity for those with an intimate, detailed knowledge of all areas of the law

in this sphere, and also of the ways in which it is so rapidly developing, to offer analysis and

opinion from an essentially unique standpoint. Nevertheless, in my view this is not a dense,

impenetrable, purely academic or overly analytical, document. Neither is it by any means

simplistic, or, in the main, naïve to the realities of, as it were, day-to-day life. In most areas it does

not presume the need for expert knowledge or understanding of the underlying principles or detail

of the law in order for the reader to be able to approach and grasp the subject matter of the various

sections and sub-sections and comprehend their meaning and potential importance. The Report is

therefore appropriately, and one imagines quite deliberately, designed to be accessible to all

interested parties, not just those from a legal, psychiatric or other professional background.

It makes the links between the law and its operation and the reality of the real practical situations

encountered in providing services for those subject to involuntary powers quite explicit. It also

shows simple good sense and in some areas in particular is extremely effective in offering

clarification of complex, difficult concepts and their application.

As it does cover such a diverse range of subject matter it is difficult to pick out specific parts to

highlight. There are, however, some areas that may be of particular interest to particular groups.

I found the discussion of VBP, or Values Based Practice, both interesting and enlightening. Here

this approach, which is intended to foster an understanding and balance of different value

perspectives in decision-making in mental health care, and in particular in relation to those

surrounding removal of the individual’s liberty, is compared and contrasted with Evidence Based

Practice. It did seem to me that while the evidence base in its true scientific sense in psychiatry at

least is relatively sparse compared to some other areas of medical practice for instance, the

value-based approach is one which has, hopefully, been espoused in many ways already but which

will obviously be further strengthened from being made explicit.

The Report makes much of the fact that there have been a number of important judgements, and

others pending, in relation to the use of the Mental Health Act 1983 and suggests that this may be

in part a result of lawyers and the judiciary being willing to pursue different approaches in the light

of the likelihood of new law. There is a particularly good, if brief, section in Chapter Six

(‘Achieving a human rights-based service’) which rehearses some of the most important matters to

do with compulsory hospital care and stigma.

An issue that should concern us in reading the Report has to do with a number of surveys the

Commission has undertaken in relation, for instance, to hospital practice, an example being that

concerned with detained patients’ access to telephones. What is most regrettable in each of the

potentially very important, but nevertheless simple, questions being asked in each of these, is the

very disappointing response rates that were obtained. One cannot help but wonder what this

means about how the Commission and its work are perceived and how the care of compulsorily

detained patients is viewed.

Much of the Report inevitably is written in the context of the human rights background and there

is, as one would expect, due weight placed upon the vital issue of user involvement, advocacy and

the dissemination of information to patients. Again, there is a particularly instructive section on

the role of social workers under the current Act and the potential for the widening of the ASW

role to involve other professionals and thus the potential for a considerable change in approach.

For anyone interested in either unidisciplinary or multidisciplinary education in mental health care

the contrast between the requirements for Section 12 approval of medical practitioners under the

1983 Act and the rigorous teaching and evaluation of social workers in preparation for the role of

ASW, which is alluded to in Chapter Eight, is a stark reminder of the evident differences in

standards and previous concerns expressed and identified around the whole issue of training of

doctors in the use of compulsory powers[[5]](#footnote-5).

Throughout the Report there is the very clear suggestion of the need for better reporting systems

for gathering data on the use of the Act nationally when new legislation finally emerges. One can

only hope that this will indeed improve and that recording and monitoring will be centralised in

some sensible, practicable way, especially to allow for research and audit to improve practice and

standards of clinical care.

For those working in the forensic field there are some important areas of discussion around, in

particular, liaison with the police over the use of Sections 135 and 136, the place of the *Police and*

*Criminal Evidence Act 1984* and the involvement of police officers at the time of mental health

assessments.

Regrettably, there are old concerns raised still which seem to have changed little over the course of

time. These include patients contact with their Responsible Medical Officer and, in some cases, the

difficulties in identifying the latter. Those regarding the use and practice of secluding patients

seemed, to me at least, to be unaltered.

In Chapter Eleven there is a discussion of the use of mechanical restraint. This is interesting in the

context of recent recommendations which have emerged in relation to the use of physical restraint

of patients by staff[[6]](#footnote-6). There are, of course, some parts of the world where mechanical restraints are

still used in preference to physical methods or sedation by the use of drugs. While I would not

wish to argue in favour of the use of the former it is of note that, anecdotally at least, patients have

been said to report a preference for this at times rather than having hands laid upon them or being

subjected to the degrading experience of the administration of intramuscular injections.

There are two specific points made which exercised me especially. One, on page 127 at sub-section

9.27, is about the use of the term “RMO” to refer to the doctor in charge of any patient’s

treatment, be they subject to compulsory powers or not. I strongly concur with the view that this

should be corrected wherever possible and actively discouraged. It is inaccurate, inappropriate and

shows a lack of understanding of the law. Secondly, in Chapter Thirteen, which addresses the

*Mental Health Act 1983* and the criminal justice system, it is suggested, within the discussion of

the making of hospital orders under Section 37 of the current Act and in relation to the problem

sometimes encountered in identifying a bed within the prescribed statutory period, that “28 days

to arrange hospital admission is a considerable length of time, ...”. Unpalatable and regrettable

though it might seem, in reality this is not the case, particularly when it comes, in the present day,

to finding a placement in a medium secure facility. This is not the result of poor standards of

clinical practice or dilatory management anymore than it is the fault of the courts. At its most

simple it is the result of there being too many mentally ill and mentally disordered people who

require this sort of placement.

*The Mental Health Act Commission Tenth Biennial Report 2001–2003* is in many ways a monumental

piece of work. There will be those who will take the time to read it in its entirety and, in my

judgement, this will repay the labour many times over. It lends itself equally well to those who may

take an alternative approach and use it as a reference document to dip into at particular times and

for a particular reason. It should certainly be included in the library of every psychiatric unit in

England and Wales where there are detained patients.

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The Biennial Report can be obtained from

The Stationery Office.

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E-mail: book.orders@tso.co.uk

1. For a summary of the Report by Mat Kinton, see JMHL February 2004, pp 44–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [2003] EWCA Civ 1036. See ‘Judicial recognition of the status of the Code of Practice’ by Anna Harding JMHL February 2004, pp 66–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mental Health Act 1983 Code of Practice, The Stationery Office (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, see ‘The Mental Health Act Commission, Ninth Biennial Report 1999–2001’, by Anselm Eldergill, JMHL February 2002, pp 85–92 @ p 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See ‘Psychiatrists’ knowledge of Mental Health Legislation’ by Martin Humphreys, JMHL October 1999 pp 150–153 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See ‘Report of the Inquiry into the death of David Bennett’ (Chair: Sir John Blofeld QC) (Feb. 2004) (Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire Strategic Health Authority). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)