

## LETTERS TO EDITOR

### IN THE AFTERMATH OF ERWADI INCIDENT

Sir,

At Erwadi, a religious place in Tamilnadu, 28 mentally ill persons lost their lives in a fire accident, because they were kept chained. Following that there have been significant steps taken by the State Government for the welfare of the mentally ill persons. These include closure of spurious centres that claim to treat and care for the mentally ill, enhancing the availability of psychiatrists in district hospitals, initiating action to implement National Mental Health Programme etc. Central Govt., on its part, has questioned State Governments on the implementation of the Mental Health Act '87. National Human Rights Commission started serious enquiries into the state of affairs of mentally ill. While all these are necessary and laudable efforts, we, as Psychiatrists, should also keep in mind two elements extremely important to the improvement of mental health care.

#### 1. Effective treatment

Apart from the beliefs in religious remedies, the prevailing discrimination against

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persons with psychiatric label, drives patients and their families to untested care options, than to psychiatric treatment (Wig, 1997). This trend will diminish, albeit slowly, when people could appreciate the effectiveness of psychiatric treatment for mental problems (Jorm, 2000). To that end, psychiatrists bear the responsibility of delivering effective treatments consistently at every possible opportunity. While this is largely being carried out, there is a lot of scope for improvement, considering the under utilization of clozapine for resistant schizophrenia and mood stabilizers for all phases of bipolar disorder. So is the case with proven psychosocial interventions also (Kuruville, 1998).

When the circle of family and friends directly experience the beneficial effects brought out by the psychiatric treatment for persons with abnormal behaviour, it sets in motion a ripple effect of increased awareness in the community. Thus, efficacy of psychiatric treatment will have a direct impact on stigma. This highlights the need for increased resources for quality psychiatric treatment which in turn calls for efforts at various levels, including, improving undergraduate psychiatry education, establishing practice guidelines, modifying the current Mental Health Act to make it pragmatic.

### 2. Mental Health Education

While 'effective treatment' may bring improvements in mental health care slowly, 'Mental Health Education' can act quickly, in improving certain aspect of Mental Health Care. In this era of Information Technology, knowledge can be quickly disseminated over large geographical area, cutting across socio-economic, linguistic and cultural barriers through media like radio, newspapers, magazines, T V & internet.

These resources are not yet tapped adequately by Mental Health Care givers or by the government. In fact, adverse and inaccurate depictions of mental illness and its treatment go unchecked in the mass media like cinemas

(Wilson et al., 1999). There has to be a focussed effort to make available credible scientific information about mental illness and its treatment, in simple language understandable to a common man (Clare, 2000).

These two efforts, effective treatment and mental health education, will take the Mental Health Care to a greater height, than short-term knee jerk reactions. And the onus, in these areas, lies with us, the mental health care providers.

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