Course ID: CMEC01

The care and custody of children by mothers with psychiatric illness

Course director: Ian Brockington

Teaching faculty: Ian Brockington, Sir Michael Rutter

Educational Objectives: To review the problems arising when mothers with psychiatric illness are in charge of young infants, including the risks of abuse and neglect, methods of investigation, and solutions.

To compare the administrative and legal arrangements made by different European countries to deal with these problems.

Course description: In the field of the psychiatry of motherhood, there is no more important, difficult and neglected problems than the care and custody of children by abused mothers who are suffering from mental illness. One the one hand, babies and children undoubtedly suffer when their mothers are severely mentally ill – if they are depressed, deluded or suffering from impaired mother-infant bonding. At the extreme the damage can include neglect and fatal assaults. On the other hand, the loss of a baby, removed from a mother with psychiatric illness, is among the worst tragedies that can occur in a woman's life.

In the diversity of Europe, with over 40 sovereign nations, each with its own traditions, laws and child protection systems, we have an opportunity to share our ideas on how this problem can be addressed. This needs to be approached from the adult and child psychiatric standpoint. To avoid the complications, it should be confirmed to the first year after childbirth.

The principles:
• It is probably universal that the child's needs are paramount.
• Some consideration must also be given to the rights and needs of the natural mother. From the mother's side, there are many different psychiatric disorders to be considered, each with different effects, course, response to treatment and prognosis.
• Chronic disorders – delusional, organic psychoses, and learning difficulties.
• Transitory disorders – severe mood disorders with delusions and/or disturbances of the mother–infant relationship.
From the children's side, we need to consider:
• The relative value of nurturing by adoptive and natural mothers.
• Whether it is necessary for the child's wellbeing to have complete break with the natural mother or whether continued access by a natural mother to her relinquished infant is compatible with the child's harmonious development.
We need to review and compare processes of assessment and placement, including:
• The assessment of risk to the child.
• Different forms of risk – physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse or neglect.
• The agencies and professional group involved in the assessment.

- Where observations are made – at home, in family day centres, in mother-and-baby homes, in psychiatric mother-and-baby units, and the resources required.
- In the resolution of disputes, the role of teamwork and adversarial debate.
- The outcomes – relinquishment without access, relinquishment with access, or care by the natural mother with monitoring safeguards.

The first session will start with two introductory lectures – one by Ian Brockington and one by Sir Michael Rutter. They will be followed by the first series of parallel small group discussions, based on actual cases. The second session will start with the second series of small group discussions. The workshop will end with feedback from these groups, and an extended discussion.

Educational methods and course material: There will be two introductory lectures, using computer projection. The main work of the day will be the consideration of actual cases by small groups. One small group session will be held in the morning, and one in the afternoon.

The last $1-1\frac{1}{2}$ hours will be devoted to a plenary session at which the small groups will be reported, followed by a general discussion. Handouts and reference will be provided.

Target audience: General Psychiatrists, child psychiatrists, other mental health professionals, lawyers and members of the lay organisations dealing with psychiatrically ill mothers or their children.

Course level: Those attending should have experience of these problems