

Human rights and psychiatry

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Physicians for Human Rights (PHR UK) is an independent group of doctors and health professionals launched two years ago by Drs Ian Munroe, former editor of the *Lancet* and Peter Kandela, a Middlesex GP. The group's aim is to direct the influence of the medical profession towards the defence of human rights, most immediately by bringing the skills of the medical profession to the aid of victims of human rights abuses (Hall, 1991).

For the individual practitioner, such an admirable objective may seem a tall order, but if doctors in a professional group work together to achieve a common goal, they can be a very powerful lobby for change. At PHR's second annual meeting, held in London in October 1991, speakers addressed different issues in the interplay of medicine and human rights. Lawyer and human rights activist, Dr Françoise Hampson, who looked at what doctors could actually be doing, singled out the Royal College of Psychiatrists for special praise over the effectiveness of its efforts to focus attention on the widespread abuse of psychiatry in the pre-*glasnost* USSR and so act as an impetus for change. Drawing on this example, Hampson emphasised the need for professional solidarity between doctors in different countries. For the individual practitioner, she believed there was scope for 'medical detective' work

if doctors could use their forensic and diagnostic skills in making objective assessments of victims of alleged torture and also in offering survivors psychosocial and physical treatment. BBC foreign correspondent, Charles Wheeler, added another side to the story as he made a plea for increased cooperation between journalists and both the medical and legal professions.

PHR are reaching out to countries where there have been human rights abuses reported and over the last two years have sent special missions to investigate the situations in Kashmir, Kuwait, South Africa and Yugoslavia. They are also building up a network of supporters in this country. At present their membership is small but eminent with 48 of the 218 members University Professors, and including a number from psychiatry. If you are interested in finding out more about the group, contact the Secretariat, c/o University Department of Forensic Medicine, The Royal Infirmary, Dundee DD1 9ND, telephone 0382 200794, fax 0382 22094.

Reference

HALL, P. (1991) Physicians for Human Rights (UK). *BMJ*, 303, 1562-1563.

Psychiatric Bulletin (1991), 16, 161-163

People and places

Natalie Cobbing Travel Fellowship

M. BAMBRICK, Senior Lecturer in Mental Handicap, Department of Mental Handicap,
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In 1987-88 I undertook a research project, to look at parental views on sterilisation for their mentally handicapped offspring. This project was prompted by the then recent decision of the High Court in the UK, which authorised the sterilisation of a 17-year-

old girl with mental handicap, and created much controversy and debate at the time. Very little was known about the views of parents as a group in the UK on this issue, and hence the decision of our Department of Mental Handicap in Nottingham