Handout 1: Mental Health Through the Ages

Throughout history, disorders of the mind have been called different names: madness, lunacy (from the belief that people became more obviously ill during a full moon), insanity, mental health problems. Beliefs about the causes of such disorders include an imbalance of bodily fluids (the Greeks and Romans), possession by devils or heresy (medieval times in Europe), and witchcraft (17th century Europe and America).

In England, the mentally ill were, until the 18th century, viewed as deviants, belonging with vagrants, the physically disabled and petty criminals, not as a separate category requiring special care and accommodation. However, the 18th century saw 'insanity' defined as a 'disease of the brain', and the development of huge institutions called asylums, usually located on the outskirts of cities or in the country, where 'the insane' could be treated (and be kept out of sight and out of public awareness).

The treatments of the time were harsh: flogging, bleeding, cold water baths, etc. In Australia, the first asylum was established in 1811 (the Castle Hill Asylum). Psychological treatment methods did not evolve until the early 20th century, starting with the ideas of Sigmund Freud. Electro-convulsive therapy was developed in 1938 (although electric shocks were used as a form of both treatment and discipline in the previous century), and psychosurgery in 1936. Modern drugs to treat the major mental illnesses began to be developed from the 1950s.

Modern Approaches to Mental Health

There have been great changes in the care of people with a mental illness in the second half of the 20th century. The advances in drug therapy, as well as a growing anti-psychiatry lobby that argued against the institutionalisation of people with a mental illness, meant the focus moved away from isolation and treatment in psychiatric institutions to an emphasis on treating and supporting people with a mental illness in their own communities through a range of community mental health services.

The large psychiatric hospitals began to close in the 1960s, with inpatients (many of whom had spent years living in the asylum) moving to a range of accommodation in the community. This process is called 'deinstitutionalisation'. Community mental health teams and supported accommodation are among some of the services that have been introduced to enable people with mental illnesses to live in the community.

People with a mental illness, their relatives and friends have formed lobby groups to improve conditions for people with a mental illness and funding for research, and to combat the stigma associated with being diagnosed with a 'mental illness'. Mental health policy is increasingly concerned with raising community awareness and understanding of mental illness, and with improving the rights of people with a mental illness.