PSYCHIATRIC EXAMINATIONS OF OFFENDERS: A SPECIALIZED SERVICE

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Psychiatric treatment of offenders presents special problems which are not usually met in the ordinary psychiatric agency that is geared to deal with law-abiding patients. Even the individual psychiatrist who plans to see offenders in his private practice must face the fact that he needs specialized knowledge for this particular type of patient, and he must be prepared to cope with situations that differ technically from those he encounters in regular psychiatric practice. This paper deals with the operations of the Association for Psychiatric Treatment of Offenders, more briefly known as the APTO, a private agency specializing wholly in the treatment of offenders. A unique feature of this agency is that the diagnosis and treatment are done in the private offices of the participating psychiatrists.

The APTO was founded in New York City in 1949 by Melitta Schmideberg, M. D., an internationally known psychoanalyst, and a co-worker, Mr. Jack Sokol, who is now executive director. The organization early attracted the attention of outstanding authorities in the field, such as Drs. Benjamin Karpman and Franz Alexander, Dr. Edward Glover of London, and Dr. Daniel Lagache of Paris. A group of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers have volunteered to aid in this pioneer effort to treat delinquency with the knowledge and advanced techniques of modern psychotherapy. The doctors contribute their services without charge, and some of the most difficult types of cases, including ex-convicts and drug addicts, are seen.

Examinations and treatment are done in the private offices of the staff members without distinguishing APTO work from their private practices. For the most part, cases are referred by courts and official agencies. Some have also been referred individually by judges, by members of the district attorney’s office, and by defense attorneys for diagnostic interviews. In some cases, these are interviews before sentencing to determine how a case can be handled most satisfactorily, that is, whether a defendant should be imprisoned, hospitalized or put on probation.
RELATIONSHIP WITH AUTHORITY

Before any psychiatric examination of an offender, it is important to determine the legal status of the patient. One must know his position in regard to the law and authority. Is he charged before the court? Has he already "taken a plea" and is now up for sentence? Is he on probation? Or if he has just been released from a correctional institution, is he on parole, and if so, how long does he have to remain on it? With such cases, psychiatrists find themselves not only involved with an individual, the patient himself, but with official agencies such as the courts, the district attorney's office, parole and probation agencies. For example, if a patient has not yet been disposed of by the courts, a therapist-member of the APTO would have to deal with the courts directly, which might involve interviews with a judge, a district attorney, or an investigating probation officer.

It must always be remembered that the fate of the patient can well be decided on the basis of the psychiatric examination, which may determine whether the offender is put on probation, and thus is available for treatment, or whether he is sent to a correctional institution, which would end the APTO's contact with him. The psychiatrist's responsibility is great, with a two-fold obligation to the community and to the patient. Actually, in most cases, one must not only convince the patient that treatment is desirable but the authorities as well.

REFERRAL OF CASES

Although cases are usually referred by official agency, some have been sent by private social agencies with aftercare departments. A few patients have come on their own, having heard about the organization from friends or other sources. The ordinary contact is initiated by letter to the APTO from a court probation department, or from the parole bureau. The letter usually gives a brief case history.

Referrals from probation departments are of two kinds: cases for pre-sentence investigation and cases of offenders who are already on parole or probation or under other official supervision. A pre-sentence investigation takes place after an offender has pleaded guilty. A probation department in this case gathers information that the judge will use in deciding on the sentence; and the department's referral to the APTO is for an evaluation of the