

Do more of the same or change for the better?

By Douglas McFadzean

"Given the choice between changing one's mind and proving that change is not necessary, most people get busy on the proof."

Professor John Kenneth Galbraith

Usually, I try and keep replies short and sweet but Colin Kirkwood's article in the last issue of *Counselling in Scotland* prompts me to comment at length. I can agree with Colin that counselling is in trouble, and that loose media speak and territorial jealousies have contributed unfairly to its tarnishing. Unfortunately, as the article progressed, little acorns of truth began to grow into great oaks of myth. It is primarily Colin's third point with which I must take issue: the empirical evidence^{1,2,3,4,6} overwhelmingly indicates that "doing more of the same" in relation to training, regulation and professionalisation generally will only serve to deepen counselling's credibility crisis, not alleviate it. Mere repetition of the same old assertions and assumptions may well extend and intensify belief in them, but it does nothing to establish their veracity. The Flat Earth Society has precious few members now despite its former popularity!

But why are things going wrong? The crux of the matter appears to be that the development of counselling as a helping *activity* has been eclipsed by an increasingly desperate desire to establish 'counsellor' as a protected job title, with the expectation of the usual professional trappings of higher remuneration and social status for practitioners. Or, to put it more bluntly, that professional self-interest has obscured what really matters from the *client's* frame of reference, notably the efficacy and availability of counselling. If BACP/UKRC, UKCP, COSCA *et al* now see themselves primarily as guardians of job titles, then they are better described as guilds or trade unions than learned bodies. In no way do I wish to challenge the right of individual practitioners to join associations which represent their interests, but society also has a moral right (and a legal right in the case of companies) to know what an organisation's real agenda and objectives are. We must also remind ourselves of the rules governing the activities of charities⁵: "Charities operate for the *public benefit*" and may seek to influence government or public opinion only "through *well-founded, reasoned argument* rather than merely through public pressure ... or on the basis of material which is merely emotive." (my italics). To continue: a charity must not "overstep the boundary between education and propaganda"; nor "provide information which it knows, or ought to know, to be inaccurate, or which has been distorted by selection to support a preconceived position"; nor "distort research or the results of research, to support a preconceived position or objective". Objectively appraising the evidence is therefore mandatory for charities, not optional. To date, neither BACP/UKRC, UKCP nor COSCA has fulfilled this duty by *substantiating* their respective positions on registration and wider regulatory aspirations. The detailed arguments and evidence cited by Richard Mowbray and others^{2,3,4} against current forms of registration and licensing have not been refuted nor even credibly challenged. Emotive calls from professional organisations to "protect the public" through statutory regulation ring hollow without evidence of the actual incidence and severity of harm caused by counselling and psychotherapy, especially relative to other unregulated activities. The suspicion of protectionism rather than public protection becomes ever stronger as such calls are repeated.

It is misleading to concentrate on counselling as "a profession in its infancy" when the activities of effective psychotherapists (whether primitive or educated, whether labelled as 'counsellors', 'healers', 'witch doctors' or whatever) have been extensively documented throughout human history, and certainly long before the current plethora of therapy models was developed⁴. *A priori*, therapy would seem to have more to do with the givens of human nature than the application of modern expert knowledge. *A fortiori*, the empirical evidence^{1,2,3} from the last 40 years of outcome research is unequivocal. It is the *similarities* rather than the differences between psychotherapies which really matter:

- ***The client is the single most potent contributor to outcome: client factors account for on average 40% of improvement, regardless of the client's formal participation in therapy.*** Hardly surprising then that even BACP has stated⁷: "Recent research suggests that clients get as much therapeutic value in reading a self-help book as in seeing a counsellor." Would anyone in a free society seriously suggest that self-help books (and clients too for that matter!) should be regulated by statute? Robyn Dawes has also pointed out² that: "There is absolutely no evidence that emotional distress necessarily implies incompetence or an inability to judge what is helping or hurting in an attempt to alleviate that distress." Why should clients who are legally competent to choose therapeutic services be unable to evaluate those services?
- ***Model and technique factors contribute only on average 15% to positive outcome; even then they must support the other common factors and be credible and persuasive from the client's point of view.*** The other factors contributing to successful outcome are the therapeutic relationship factors (30%) and expectancy, hope and placebo factors (15%). While a great deal of resources are spent on refining and training people in theoretical approaches and techniques, their contribution to successful therapy is the least significant of the four major groups of factors. Miller, Duncan and Hubble recently concluded¹: "We may have to 'fire' treatment models and their ideological proponents. The reason is simple - they do not work. They neither explain nor contribute to effective therapy. Moreover, there is evidence that they may actually prevent practitioners from learning what does." Changing from his previous position, BACP Fellow Colin Feltham now states⁴ that: "I have come to believe that there are serious philosophical and clinical objections which lead to the conclusion that training in and support for a core theoretical model are ultimately untenable and even oppressive."
- ***Effective therapy does not depend on the practitioner's academic qualifications, length of training, theoretical orientation or participation in personal therapy.*** This infers that the main criteria normally used by professional organisations to accredit and register practitioners are spurious. Potential clients, employers and funders are therefore being cajoled by "the profession" to rely on irrelevant credentials. The practical and ethical issues raised by this are far reaching, particularly regarding client autonomy and social justice. With this knowledge, how can we justify encouraging clients to suspend their own judgement of a practitioner's effectiveness ("trust me, I'm accredited") or depriving society of more therapeutic services at lower cost? As the public becomes more aware of 'the myth of professional expertise' in this field, the credibility of practitioners and service providers who continue to participate in invalid credentialing schemes will inevitably be put on the line. (This finding should not, of course, be taken to mean that "therefore training doesn't matter"; it is the current types of training which should rightly be called into question. Also, I am still awaiting any evidence of the efficacy of 'counselling supervision' in ensuring practitioner effectiveness and ethical counselling practice.)

If counselling is to qualify as a modern profession, it has to *sound* sufficiently special and arcane to be practised only by suitably credentialled experts with a protected job title. Ring-fencing the field by job title appears to be the only practicable way for lobbyists to win legislation⁴, as it seems highly unlikely that general agreement on the definitions of 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' as activities will ever be reached. Once title protection is achieved, practice restriction could easily follow by adopting the apparently ridiculous but potentially effective circular definition of counselling as "what a counsellor does". However, attempts by counselling bodies to redefine the public's everyday understanding of the words 'counselling' and 'supervision' are already making heavy weather. The wo/man in the street (and apparently the VQ Lead Body and the Department of Health⁴) can still use common sense to see through professional fogging and contrivance aimed at restricting practice. No wonder that practitioners in other fields of health and caring who use counselling as an *activity* in their work are bemused by the 'counselling skills' distinction, countering it with: "I may be doing some gardening/baking today though I would not call myself a gardener/baker, but I'm certainly not going to say I am 'a user of gardening/baking skills'!"

Colin Kirkwood states that: "We take very seriously our responsibility to develop procedures of self-regulation to protect the public by ensuring high standards of training and practice and accessible and effective means of redress". Perhaps such a pious proclamation does help "the profession" to feel better about itself and enhance belief in its public interest, but again the *evidence* from research strongly suggests a different reality^{2,3,4}: "[professional] disciplinary action is extremely ineffective as a means of protecting the public" (Mowbray). As a means of redress, the professional/trade association code of practice/complaints procedure paradigm has been much criticised by government and consumer groups⁶. The fundamental practical and ethical flaw has been exposed time and time again: *representational and disciplinary roles do not mix*. Professional bodies which try to reconcile both have an inherent conflict of interest. Paternalistic altruism versus economic self-interest! In addition, most complaint procedures are daunting to potential complainers and eventually provide little or no practical recompense. Existing laws (for example, on contracts and the supply of services) do underpin many aspects of counselling services, and a complainer's time and money may often be better spent in pursuing legal action as a consumer than engaging in a professional complaints procedure first. On a more philosophical level, a strong case can be made^{2,3,4,8} that didactic codes of ethics and practice and current forms of complaint handling are incompatible with the very nature and values of counselling and psychotherapy. More public education about therapy and better and earlier means of arbitration or conflict resolution are certainly indicated. In any case, "doing more of the same" is very unlikely to win enduring public confidence.

Burn me as a professional heretic if you must, but before lighting the pyre, let the jury of public, politicians and practitioners consider *all* the evidence, be it supportive or contrary to the status quo. The qualities of self-awareness and congruence so valued in the individual practitioner sadly seem to elude the corporate interests which assume the authority (or perhaps more arrogantly, the right) to speak for counselling and psychotherapy. Let me end with this telling tale of the Mulla Nasrudin⁹:

Nasrudin and the Wise Men

The philosophers, logicians and doctors of law were drawn up at Court to examine Nasrudin. This was a serious case, because he had admitted going from village to village saying: 'The so-called wise men are ignorant, irresolute and confused.' He was charged with undermining the security of the State.

'You may speak first,' said the King.

'Have paper and pens brought,' said the Mulla.

Paper and pens were brought.

'Give some to each of the first seven savants.'

They were distributed.

'Have them separately write an answer to this question: "What is bread?"'

This was done. The papers were handed to the King, who read them out:

The first said: 'Bread is a food.'

The second: 'It is flour and water.'

The third: 'A gift of God.'

The fourth: 'Baked dough.'

The fifth: 'Changeable, according to how you mean "bread".'

The sixth: 'A nutritious substance.'

The seventh: 'Nobody really knows.'

'When they decide what bread is,' said Nasrudin, 'it will be possible for them to decide other things. For example, whether I am right or wrong. Can you entrust matters of assessment and judgement to people like this? Is it or is it not strange that they cannot agree about something which they eat every day, yet are unanimous that I am a heretic?'

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