

O'Reilly and Handforth - Some Early Experiences with Horticulture as Therapy

In "recent" times O'Reilly and Handforth (1955) were among the first to examine the value of horticulture as a therapy for psychiatric patients. They looked at a horticultural programme for 14 women patients who had been considered as unresponsive to all forms of treatment. Of this group 11 were diagnosed as schizophrenic, 1 as epileptic with behavioural problems and 2 as 'mental defectives'. In their article O'Reilly and Handforth presented the case studies of all 14 patients and noted that:

"Of the 14 patients who participated in our pilot project, only one has failed to show a striking degree of improvement. The other 13 are still mentally ill, but in relinquishing their positions of isolation, they have become better adapted to the hospital environment"

They recorded an improvement in the personal appearance and hygiene of the patients, reduced violent outbursts, increased communication and reduced isolation. The patients also became interested in the social functions of the hospital and were willing to participate in them. One brief case study illustrates the improvement:

"Miss M.R. - This 39-year-old schizophrenic patient has been in hospital since 1939, having become psychotic in adolescence. She continued to deteriorate in spite of physical therapies and was filthy in her habits, resistive, and destructive. In addition to exhibiting the usual schizophrenic pattern of withdrawal, she took pains never to show her face, even when eating. On the ward, she neglected her personal appearance and was never interested in any activity.

Since joining the gardening group she has, for the first time in many years, become interested in something. This interest has been accompanied by an improvement in her personal appearance, and a general improvement in her habits. She no longer keeps her face covered, and is eager to go out with the group each morning".

The gardening programme had a cohesive effect on the dynamics of the group and where previously the patients had behaved as isolated, withdrawn individuals they began to function as a social unit:

"Whereas at first each patient went her own way, lost in her own fantasies, there has been a definite trend towards greater cohesion. Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication have increased. It is noteworthy that even on days when the weather is too bad for patients to go out, they still stick together as a group on the ward. Not only does the group hold together, but the group feeling has communicated itself to other patients on the ward, and requests to join the group are beginning to be heard".

It is probably fair to say that if modern drugs had been available to O'Reilly and Handforth they would have tried those first, and they may well have been

effective, but it is interesting to consider how effective the gardening programme was in the patients. It is also interesting to consider how a horticultural therapy programme can contribute to the effectiveness of a modern treatment regimen for patients with mental health problems.

Reference:

O'Reilly, P., O. & Handforth, J. R. (1955), *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol: **111**, 763-76