

There can be no doubt that -- with one out of every 225 Canadians listed as a mental hospital patient last year -- the problem of caring for the mentally ill has taken on added urgency in recent years. Although the figures may not be altogether comparable because of improvements in statistical reporting, it would appear that, over the past two decades, mental illness has increased at a faster rate than the growth of our population.

Mental health statistics of this kind give us cause for serious concern but their significance cannot be readily assessed. It does not necessarily follow that Canadians are more subject to mental breakdown in these troubled years than they were in the less complex society of a generation ago. It would seem reasonable to conclude that a proportion of the apparent increase in the incidence of mental illness is a reflection of our improved facilities for diagnosis of mental and emotional disorders and of the greatly increased public understanding of the problem.

Certainly, the remarkable recent advances in psychiatry and the understanding of human behaviour, and the development by mental health workers of new skills and more effective therapies have resulted in the discovery and treatment of conditions that would have gone neglected a generation ago. Today, mental health clinics are seeking out disorders in their early and more curable stages and techniques like shock therapy and brain surgery are working miracles in treating conditions that once were regarded as beyond the reach of human help.

A Positive Mental Health Programme

The outstanding health achievement of the past fifty years has been the conquest of so many of the infectious diseases that once took such a heavy toll in life and physical health. I would venture to predict that the health story of the second half of the Twentieth Century will be our progress towards the eventual management of mental ill health.

In overcoming scourges like typhoid fever, it was, of course, the clinician who first discovered the causative agent. But in safeguarding populations against the deadly typhoid bacillus, sanitary engineers, food handlers, public health workers and many others are responsible for the preventive steps that now keep food and drinking water safe and clean.

So it must be with mental health. A positive mental health programme involves not only the clinical worker who is responsible for the treatment and care of those already ill, important though these activities may be. It requires a concerted effort on the part of all who work in this field to remove from the human environment those factors which are harmful to sound mental health. Only if we are prepared to use all the resources available to us in the development of vigorous preventive campaigns can we hope to achieve victories over mental illness comparable to those which have already been won over the epidemic diseases that once imperilled physical well-being.