

REPORT ON MENTAL RETARDATION IN SINGAPORE

In Singapore there has hardly been any interest in the mentally retarded child right up to the year 1960. The only people interested were the social workers who because they had to deal with the social problems associated with mental retardation, kept a register of mentally retarded children. In fact it was not uncommon to obtain histories of such mentally defective, restless children being tied at home or given away to other families for illegal adoption. It was not uncommon, when parents confronted with the medical and social problems associated with mental retardation, would leave false addresses, when children were admitted into hospitals, and leave bewildered almoners to find out methods of tracking their homes. Fortunately, in the days before antibiotics these children died, but nowadays, with improved health conditions, we have to cope with the problems and training of retarded children.

In 1950, the only home for mentally defective children was run by the Social Welfare Department, and priority for admission was given to children who were abandoned or who were deemed to be in need of care and protection, according to the Children's and Young Persons Ordinance.

THE SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION FOR RETARDED CHILDREN

In 1960, the Singapore Children's Society with financial assistance from the Rotary Club started a pilot project - a day-training centre for retarded children which provided training for 18 children. The Centre's success led to the formation of the Singapore Association for Retarded Children (SARC) in 1962 with the following aims and objectives:-

- (a) to secure improvement in the general welfare of mentally retarded children, regardless of the degree of handicap, cause or classification and whether or not the children live at home or in institutions;
- (b) to secure for all mentally retarded children the benefits of care, treatment and training appropriate to their disability and to encourage the development of statutory and voluntary effort on their behalf;
- (c) to promote and stimulate research into the causes, cure and prevention of mental retardation for developing locally appropriate methods of treatment and training for retarded children;
- (d) to develop a better public understanding of the needs of retarded children;
- (e) to encourage the formation of Parents' Group and to provide support and assistance through mutual co-operation with such group; and
- (f) to solicit funds for the accomplishments of these objects.

The Association then operated a day-training centre for a total of 80 children. With the help of the Government who gave the Association the land, the main administration and training centre (Lee Kong Chian Centre) was built in 1969.

To date the Association maintains 5 training centres with a total enrolment of 510 children. The following are among the skills we try to impart to the retarded children.

- (1) The basic skills to help pupils to be independent, able to dress themselves, look after themselves and fend for themselves.
- (2) Some basic social skills - to train pupils to acquire socially acceptable behaviour.
- (3) Hand skills - to enable retarded children to earn a living and be of some use to others.

In addition the Association runs three sheltered workshops for the extension of training the mentally handicapped over 16 years of age. Presently about 90 young adults are receiving training in these workshops. An effort is made to prepare these young adults for open employment.

The jobs at the workshops for the less capable vary from making of gift packages, boxes, folding of advertising pamphlets, assembling of ball point pens, making of plastic bags and cookies. Those more capable are placed in open employment at the factories and offices where possible.

The Association also maintains a residential home for the severely retarded which has a capacity for 70 inmates. Admission is limited to retardates from families with problems of a short term or long term nature. Length of stay for short term cases is up to a maximum of 6 months. Long term stay residents usually have no families or come from very deprived family background.

The Association for Educationally Subnormal Children

Before this Association was formed in 1976, the mildly retarded children (or Educationally Subnormal) were registered under the Singapore Association for Retarded Children. Initially classes were run in Church premises. In 1979, the Association obtained the lease of an old Government school now renamed the Katong Special School. Presently, it provides education for 140 children. It has a waiting list of 300 children and is growing. Clearly, it shares the same problem as SARC ie the lack of funds and limited building space.

Other Services:

The Government provides two wards of 40 beds for the severely retarded who need medical and nursing care at the Woodbridge Hospital. For the family whose situation is sufficiently pressing, the children can be fostered out through the fostering scheme, where the Social Welfare pays foster mothers to look after these children.

The Register and Source of referral

In 1963, the Central Register was started by the Singapore Association for Retarded Children. All doctors at Infant Welfare Clinics, School Clinics, Outpatient Clinics, and general practitioners were alerted and every child on the register is given a M.D.R. Number. The certification of mental subnormality is made by a doctor, and the child is put on the register, and the social worker arranges for the children to be seen by a paediatrician before admission for training at the Centre. To date there are 5200 children on the Central Register. Majority of the children referred come from the Paediatric Unit of the Singapore General Hospital where the parents bring their children forward not because they are mentally retarded but because they are ill.

Another source of referrals come from the School Health Services and most of them fall in the age group from 5-9 years. The rest of referrals come from the other hospitals, Government clinics, Associations dealing with other handicapped, Child Psychiatric Clinic, general practitioners. There are also some cases of self-referrals.

CONCLUSION

While the Government has done quite a lot in raising the standard of living of the people and giving free education to any child who wants to go to school, we are still one step short of carrying out compulsory education for children of school-going age. It is hoped that in the year 1981, the International Year of the Handicapped, the educational, physical and social needs of the mentally handicapped in Singapore will be improved.

Reference:

- (1) Dr Freda M Paul - A survey of Mental Subnormality in Singapore (Printed by SARC)
- (2) Singapore Association for Retarded Children - Annual Report 1979/1980
- (3) Association for Educationally Sub-Normal Children - Annual Report & Accounts 1978