The role of the paraprofessional

To the Editor:

An unresolved issue in treatment today is the role of the paraprofessional in mental health. In too many ways, hospitals and clinics are remaining locked into a system which sees the professional alone delivering services to the client population. I would suggest that this is a very ineffective system for delivering services. The fears often expressed by the institution are, although legitimate concerns, unacceptable excuses for withholding information as vital to the line staff as to the therapist.

It appears that the paraprofessionals working in hospitals, clinics, and other day and residential settings are experiencing a type of institutional schizophrenia, in which the institution withholds pertinent information about the patient from the paraprofessional staff, while at the same time expecting them to help in the treatment process. Within this system, the paraprofessional becomes, in fact, a child submissive to the institution and the therapists in charge. One wonders whether it is because he shares the same living space and spends all of his working day with the clients of the institution that the paraprofessional in some ways is a patient in the institution's eyes, needing to be closely observed for some aberrant behavior that will reveal his true colors.

Whether the roots of this sickness are in the insecurity of the professional staff and their fear of failure or in the caste system existing in the mental health field, there needs to be a change. I strongly advocate a total team involvement in which ideas and treatment strategy are shared without respect to status or position. My own experience with such an approach has been extremely successful. The availability of knowledge about a case or a treatment decision should not be reserved to the therapist alone but shared with all whose contact with the patient is significant.

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