

PATIENT HEAL THY SELF

Clinical psychologists are to be trained by patients in a groundbreaking new strategy at the University of Manchester.

Dr Rory Allott is recruiting people from throughout the community to review Clinical Psychology training at the School of Psychological Science.

This follows a move towards 'user centrality' in the NHS that is, putting the patient at centre of everything the NHS does. The University is trying to match this new approach by involving the community in all aspects of professional training. Three years ago, Rory founded a small, highly successful network of clinical psychology trainees, lecturers and patient representatives. The group now want to extend this work into the heart of the community.

He explained: "In the first week of training there's a lecture called Collaborating with Consumers, meaning 'collaboration' as opposed to 'treatment'. Two past users of mental health services from the group, Graham Stierl and Carol Lovett, deliver a lecture to trainees on the experience of receiving a mental health service. It helps the trainees experience what it's like when someone has their first consultation with a mental health professional.

"There are no introductions. I just start reading from the Canterbury Tales in Middle English. Being polite students sit attentively for a while and try to understand what's going on. Then they fade in and out, get irritable and after five minutes can get quite angry. This has huge parallels with the actual experience of sitting in front of a Doctor."

Graham Stierl knows exactly how that feels. As a young man, he labelled the mentally ill 'nutters'. Ten years ago, having been made redundant and lost his father,

mother, 36-year-old sister and 17-year-old son, he suffered a breakdown.

"I went to bed on the Friday night and on the Saturday morning I had just gone, I couldn't take anymore," he said. "I didn't see it coming. I didn't know what to do."

Graham, 59, from Clayton, found that joining self help groups added immensely to his treatment. He has been involved in 20 different groups over the decade, such as Crisis Point and Having A Voice, in Oldham, Wigan and Liverpool, in a variety of roles including vice president. He found his involvement in these groups extremely rewarding.

"People would come to Having a Voice with their heads down and we'd help them," he explained.

"We'd organise everything from trips to part time jobs. At Having A Voice there have been four marriages and two engagements so far, and only three people have returned to hospital in 14 years.

"It has given me confidence, helped me feel even better about myself. Not only have I come back, I am able to help others. Now I can say I'm the expert here, I know what it's like, I've been there."

Carol Lovett agrees: "Setting up the group at the University of Manchester has been genuinely inclusive. We established the agenda for the work together, which allowed me and Graham to contribute fully, exactly like everyone else around the table - we were made to feel like equals. It has been a great experience."

Carol, 50, from Higher Openshaw, suffered a breakdown in 1998 as she completed her degree course with a 2:1 and came to the end of a messy divorce, while still caring for her two children, then aged 10 and 15.

"I had managed to get through so much but, as my course and the divorce came to an end, I lost it," she recalled. "I didn't want to leave my bedroom. I wouldn't eat or drink too much so I didn't have to go to the toilet. I never went downstairs or answered the phone.

"Luckily I was helped by my friends and family and received very supportive treatment without having to go to hospital.

"Getting better at home was very important. In the same way, working with service user groups has empowered me, plus it's harder to argue with someone who has been there, who knows exactly what it's like. We have a lot to offer the trainees."

Rory said: "We are moving away from the Ivory Tower and putting out some rope ladders into the community. People who have experience of using health services generate ideas that I could never come up with - for example, only someone who has spent long periods in hospital could possibly know what that is like. This expertise can bring an extra dimension to the training of Clinical Psychologists.

"The people we recruit to help guide training will provide a long needed bridge to others around them. This will ensure that the Clinical Psychologists of the future provide services that meet the wants of their patients."

Rory hopes to recruit people from throughout the North West representing all the groups of people who might use Clinical Psychology services: adults, older adults, children and young people and people with learning difficulties. He hopes they will get involved in all aspects of training: curriculum development, extending the database of interested community groups, training the lecturers or attending meetings with organisers of training.