

April 11 2016, 1:01am, The Times

Mind Block

Healthcare providers are doing too little for children with treatable mental disorders

"My friends forsake me like a memory lost," wrote the poet John Clare in despair at his mental disorders. A troubled mind is no less devastating than a broken limb but the damage is less visible. This poses a constant challenge for healthcare providers and policymakers. Treating and preventing mental illness is as crucial a policy goal as ensuring physical health. That simple humanitarian imperative is far from being met.

New research from the CentreForum think tank suggests that healthcare providers are turning away as many as a quarter of the children and young people referred to them for mental illness become adults whose work, leisure and family lives are blighted by the same conditions.

The CentreForum study was chaired by Norman Lamb, MP, who served as mental health minister in the coalition government. Its members include also Professor Tanya Byron, who wrote *The Times's* manifesto on child mental health, *Time to Mind*, last year. Our campaign calls for greater investment in services and early intervention. The new study demonstrates dispiritingly that these are not happening.

The institutional failures are many. Mental ailments such as clinical depression, anxiety or eating disorders debilitate and destroy lives and happiness. Professionals such as teachers may spot the signs but be unable on their own to refer children for treatment. Even with GP referrals, many children are turned away or kept waiting because the criteria for treatment are too arduous.

The coalition government pledged an extra £1.25 billion for specialist mental health services for young people. That is welcome but the money is staggered over five years. The budget for children's mental health services is, even with this money, less than 10 per cent of the mental health budget. Mental health provision in general, and children's services in particular, would surely be a greater priority for politicians and providers if the symptoms of illness were as obvious as physical injury. The stigma of mental disorder casts a long shadow, as does the notion that children suffering from it are attention-seeking. In reality, mental illness is as old as civilisation, and modern science provides methods of alleviating and curing it.

Treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy and compassion-focused therapy are no mere psychobabble. They are proven means of interrogating destructive modes of thinking and replacing them in the patient's mind with more rational ones. Their roots are in the ancient tradition of Socratic dialogue. These talking therapies are cost-effective to dispense and administer.

Investing in such services for children will benefit the taxpayer by preventing children from becoming troubled adults. The greatest benefit of all, however, will be to those who suffer, silently and confusedly, from illnesses that science does not yet fully understand but can treat.