

Innovation and influence; the work of the Tavistock & Portman clinics

Since it opened just over a century ago — in Tavistock Square, London — the Tavistock has pioneered talking therapies for the public, and trainings for that. The clinic was a founder member of the NHS and from then on has been making unique contributions to clinical, training, research and consulting practice: outpatient psychotherapy for complex needs including personality disorders, the creation of peer supervision groups for GPs and other professions (Balint groups, now a global movement), ‘working below the surface’ consultancy to public, corporate and third sector organisations, a new NHS profession of child and adolescent psychotherapy that has become internationally known, along with infant observation which is now an integral part of trainings for both adult and child psychoanalysts worldwide, the first brief therapy service in the NHS, group relations training conferences — now practiced in every continent and the basis of the Tavistock consultancy model, a self-referral brief counselling service for adolescents and young adults up to 25, couples therapy, under-fives services and consultations, group therapy for adults and children, educational therapy, an integrated trauma service for adults, the first training in systemic family therapy in the UK, a therapeutic primary school for disturbed children, gender identity service for adults, specialist psychotherapy for autism and learning disabilities across the lifespan, perinatal and parent-infant therapy, intensive nurse-led community support for suicidal adolescents and — from 1994 — when the already distinguished Portman Clinic joined the Tavistock in a new combined NHS trust, a nationwide service providing specialist psychotherapies for children and adults who are at risk of, or have committed, violent or sexual criminal offences.

Whatever the clinical problem, there is always a developmental story to consider; what relationships and experiences in their lives, and in preceding generations, have had an impact on the people now asking for help?

Trainees in these services get intensive supervision in a huge clinical and academic programme for a diverse group of psychologists, social workers, psychotherapists, nurses and psychiatrists, who also learn from each other. They are trained to practice clinically and to work with colleagues and service users in the community; in GP surgeries, early years settings, schools, courts (the Family Drug and Alcohol Court), general hospitals and paediatric departments, social services, prisons, probation and high security special hospitals, and promoting system change and leadership in public, private and voluntary sectors (Tavistock Consulting). There are linked training centres in Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol and Leeds. People come from all over the world to train at the Tavistock and Portman.

Meanwhile eight decades of original research — including the identification of attachment as a fundamental human drive, ‘learning from experience’ about our own authority and leadership in teams and organisations, the study — including the scientific film ‘a two-year-old goes to hospital’ — of young children in hospital without parental visits, and into the impact on parents of the secret disposal of stillborn babies — both of which changed national NHS policy in paediatrics and midwifery, research in brief therapy, in treatments for eating disorders, sexual abuse, emotional deprivation, psychotic states, autism, integration of physical and emotional healthcare, intergenerational trauma, childhood depression, fostering and adoption, self harm, parent-infant interaction, refugees, pre-term birth, first-time parents, family-nurse partnership, ‘Watch Me Play!’: remotely-delivered promotion of resilience in early years settings, longitudinal outcomes of gender identity, video guidance for families of children with a learning disability, personalised intervention for conduct disorders for children and parents not helped by parent training, promotion of self-regulation in primary school children, treatment-resistant adult depression — innovations that continue to influence practice in Britain, in north and south America, Scandinavia, Australia, Germany, Italy, France, Russia and Eastern Europe, China and Japan, amongst others. The sixty-first volume in the Tavistock Clinic book series was published last year.

There is no other public service in the world that contains this range of learning and skills, looking inwards to human experience and outwards to the social world.