

Book Review

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Forgotten children: addressing the health needs of looked after children and young people. The Residential Care Health Project, Astron, Edinburgh, 2004. 96 pp. ISBN 0-9546292-0-5 (Pbk), £14.95.

Forgotten Children is the report of the Lothian-based Residential Care Health Project. It should be compulsory reading for any health and social work professional who works with looked after and accommodated children. At a simple level, it adds further confirmation of the serious health difficulties facing young people looked after away from their families. The team discovered high levels of psychological and physical morbidity – much of which had either not been diagnosed before or had been lost to follow up because of the lack of stability in children's lives.

For me, however, the most interesting part of the book is the description of how the team were able to engage residential staff, and the young people themselves, in the process of assessing young people's health needs. The team invested time and effort in understanding the difficulties facing workers and young people. Young people were enabled to engage with the process of a comprehensive health assessment at their own pace and on their own terms. The way in which the issue of confidentiality was dealt with is a model example of respecting children's rights and also recognising that workers need detailed information to care well for these children. It is clear that the team worked with real sensitivity to young people and their emotional pain but were also able to understand and respect the extraordinary job that residential workers do.

Alongside the process of undertaking a comprehensive health assessment for 105 children, the team identified structural difficulties in the provision of health care for these young people. Primary care practitioners faced a particular problem providing a proper service to these young people as they rarely had a proper set of records for them. The team helped to develop strong links between residential child care units and local GP practices and negotiated a fast track process for the transfer of records. They also worked to enhance the quality and amount of health information held at unit level and developed a unit-held record that follows the young people if they change placement. The high level of emotional and behavioural difficulties identified has also resulted in the development of a new dedicated mental health service for looked after and accommodated children in this region.

The work of the project is an excellent example of interdisciplinary working that has led to immediate improvements in the health of several young people and a sustainable change in the way health care is delivered to these young people in the future. The work of this project should inform other developments that are now beginning throughout the UK.