**Definition of challenging behaviour**

Challenging behaviour is a descriptive concept, which is largely socially constructed,

and its meaning is subject to changes in social norms and service delivery patterns over time and across geographical areas. The term itself carries no diagnostic significance, and makes no inferences about the aetiology of the behaviour. It covers a heterogeneous group of behavioural phenomena across different groups of people; for example, oppositional behaviour in children, faecal smearing in those with a severe learning disability and deliberate self-harm in adult mental illness. Challenging behaviour may be unrelated to psychiatric disorder.

**Service issues in the management of challenging behaviour**

Management needs to be tailored to the individual person, taking into account the

particular behaviour and the setting in which it occurs. Multi-agency, multi-disciplinary involvement is necessary, and it is essential to gather detailed information about the nature and outcome of previous interventions. Different treatment modalities, i.e. pharmacotherapy, psychological and social interventions, alone or in combination,

may be required. Only one treatment should be introduced at a time. The safety of the person displaying the challenging behaviour and of others must be considered carefully. A detailed risk assessment should be conducted, and the degree of urgency of response decided. Treatment in a safe and secure environment, if necessary within the framework of the Mental Health Act in a specialised unit.

**Steps towards systematic assessment and treatment of challenging behaviour**

Identification of target behaviour(s)

Quantitative measurement of target behaviour

Generation of hypotheses (medical, psychological and social) about the genesis and

maintenance of the behaviour

Delivery of therapeutic intervention designed to test the hypotheses developed in line

with a sequential, single hypothesis-testing model

Evaluation of effectiveness of the intervention

Generation and testing of alternative hypothesesay need to be considered primary or secondary

**Controversial issues in the management of challenging behaviour**

Challenging behaviour is a socially constructed concept, and as such represents an

entity of questionable validity. There exists no consensus about the borders between health and social care and what constitutes a health or social issue in relation to challenging behaviour. Interventions for challenging behaviour (including physical restraint, seclusion/exclusion and programmes based on the principles of reinforcement) have the potential to be misused as punishment or a method of social control. The use of drug treatment for challenging behaviour with no clearly understood neurochemical basis, and with no evidence of underlying mental illness, may be both ethically and scientifically dubious. Use of the Mental Health Act for challenging behaviour may be open to abuse. Controversy about the most appropriate clinical speciality may result in patients

‘falling between two stools’.