

# The Royal Medico-Psychological Association and the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Bristol

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The Royal Hotel overlooking College Green in Bristol accommodated members attending the Spring Quarterly Meeting of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (RMPA) in May 1957 and the Annual Conference of the Specialist Section of General Psychiatry of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in May 1994. I was privileged to be there both times.

At the time of the first meeting psychiatric hospitals were perhaps rather overcrowded but flourishing from having come into line with the rest of medicine at the inception of the National Health Service (NHS), a more permissive treatment regime and the arrival of phenothiazines, tricyclics, monoamine oxidase inhibitors and sundry tranquillisers like methylpentynol and meprobamate to oust the barbiturates. Also many psychiatrists, notably Dr Robert Hemphill of Bristol, believed that hormones were therapeutic for various mental disorders. Fairly uncomplicated optimism was in an air as yet unsullied by antipsychiatrists. I vividly remember Dr William Sargant, then in his charismatically influential heyday and surrounded by admirers, enthusing in the hotel lounge that there was about to be a 'breakthrough'. Topics of papers and seminars, given at the Barrow Hospital, Barrow Gurney, included 'The changing of use of observation wards' by Dr Donald Early, 'The development of the day hospital' by Dr Ernest Cross, 'Homosexuality as a medico-legal problem' by Dr Alexander Leitch and Mr G.A. Forrest, a presentation on puerperal depression by Dr Hemphill himself and two on electroconvulsive therapy, one about unilaterality by Dr Neville Lancaster and the other comparing the treatment with

and without relaxants by Dr, as he then was, Philip Seager.

Despite the prevailing euphoria there were rumblings that all was not well. In response to a request from the British Medical Association (BMA) for cooperation in a review of 'The Mental Health Service's aspects of the National Health Service', Council had decided to circularise members asking for their views 'on existing difficulties' as well as 'suggested improvements'. Another communication from the BMA voiced 'some disquiet' about recommendations from the Minister of Health recommending 'a considerable degree of autonomy' for all medical auxiliaries. Council agreed that there was 'some ground for apprehension' and decided to associate themselves with the BMA in representations to the Minister.

Whether or not Dr Sargant's 'breakthrough' has materialised depends on all sorts of variables of opinion although probably most would agree that it has not occurred altogether by way of the physical treatments that he championed.

The venue for the 1994 meeting was the Swallow Hotel, not a mental hospital. That was one change and then speakers illustrated how psychiatrists have added to their many skills the art of persuasion for funding and even survival of their specialties. Thus Dr Margaret Oates argued for services for puerperal mental illnesses, Dr Chris Bass for liaison psychiatry and Dr Bob Palmer for patients with eating disorders. In the business meeting of the Section there was advice that petitions to purchasers should be short and written in 'managementese'. (If that means detaching participles, talking in clichés, abundance of the impersonal passive and general sloppiness

and obfuscation, I cannot agree. We should not sink to their level but educate them by example). Among matters which needed this kind of advocacy were staffing in psychiatric wards and psychiatric care in the community. For psychotherapy in psychiatry this persuading was all the more important because, following the trend noted by the RMPA in 1957, the autonomy of 'medical auxiliaries' had become so great that the growth market in psychotherapy featured not psychiatrists but social workers, psychologists and lay psychotherapists.

Dr Adrienne Reveley described a current necessity, which could be making Dr Sargant turn in his grave, for another kind of argument. To treat with clozapine she had to be aggressive with the Mental Health Act Commission, the Mental Health Review Tribunal (MHRT) and her patients, of whom all appealed 'all the time' and one was discharged by a MHRT.

Also illustrative of today's conflicts was a report by Dr Rob MacPherson of an investigation into distress in workers caring for the elderly and a debate on the motion that recent NHS reforms were for the general betterment of patients. A young non-medical administrator proposed it very courageously and pertinently and attracted much heat and conservatism as well as reason but, his opposing leader being Professor Jim Watson, he carried almost no one with him.

However, Dr Sargant would have applauded papers on high dose antipsychotic treatment by Professor Steven Hirsch, the pharmacology of atypical antipsychotics by Dr David Baldwin and rapid tranquillisation for disturbed patients by Dr Anne Jeffers, and workshops on working with the media and witness skills for courts, although workshops on ICD-10 and clinical audit would not, I think, have accorded well with his personality and interests.

Those attending the 1957 meeting went to a performance of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, now controversially on everybody's lips, at the Theatre Royal and on to a dance at Fishponds Hospital, whereas in 1994 uninhibited karaoke followed a conference dinner.

College Green seemed this time to be traversed by more paths than in 1957 but, flanked by the cathedral, council house and Lord Mayor's chapel, it retained all its grace and charm. The hotel, although it had been closed for most of the intervening period, seemed very much the same except for a prefix of Swallow and a splendid romanesque swimming bath. Bristol retained all its maritime and commercial fascination. Inns such as 'Dr Thirsty's Surgery', 'The Llandoger Trow' and 'Naval Volunteer' evoked images of *Treasure Island* and the press gang and an original stand for paying 'on the nail' symbolised quick cash payment. Clattering along the streets was a fabulous black and gold Lord Mayor's coach, with gloriously attired drive and footmen, conveying the Duke of Edinburgh to lay the first plank in the hull of a replica of *Matthew*, in which John Cabot sailed in 1497 to cross the Atlantic. Then the Duke ascended from College Green in his red helicopter, seeing from the skies that another of his interests, Brunel's *Great Britain*, and indeed the city itself were 'All ship shape and Bristol fashion'.

### Reference

THE ROYAL MEDICO-PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (1957) Spring Quarterly Meeting. *Journal of Mental Science*, **103**, October Suppl., 1-4.

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