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Stigma and Mental Health Challenges in Medical Students

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Historically, a stigma was a scar on the skin of ancient Greek criminals. It was a sign to all that these people were unsafe, unclean and unwanted. Stigma still persists today in the attitudes towards those who have mental health challenges. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the medical profession. Indeed, the 2008 Stigma Shout Survey of almost 4000 people using mental health services and carers revealed that healthcare professionals were a common source of stigma reported by people with mental illness. A recent study identified stigma to be a barrier to the use of mental health services by 30 % of medical students experiencing depression.

There is a growing perception that science alone provides overall insufficient foundation for the holistic understanding of the interaction between health, illness and disease. The health humanities has emerged as a distinct entity in attempts to ameliorate the limitations in the provision of healthcare services and can broadly be described as the application of literature and art to medicine. Autobiographical narrative is gaining popularity among medical students with mental health challenges both as a means to campaign against stigma and as an effective form of adjunctive therapy. Indeed, a recent randomized controlled trial on the efficacy of Coming Out Proud with mental health challenges revealed immediate positive effects on stigma stress related variables. We herein provide a candid and courageous narrative from a British medical student who has first-hand experience of a psychotic episode in the context of a severe depressive illness.