History of psychiatry in the curriculum?

History is part of life and life is part of history: why psychiatrists need to understand it better

Graham Ash, Claire Hilton, Robert Freudenthal, Thomas Stephenson and George Ikkos

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Effectiveness in psychiatry today mandates a generic professional capabilities framework, which includes the need to develop the professional values, actions and aspirations fundamental to becoming a ‘dedicated doctor’. The history of psychiatry has potential to facilitate this learning, both by an understanding of content and the ability to think historically.

In the light of ‘Shape of Training’, Professor David Greenaway’s report on medical education for the UK General Medical Council (GMC) (https://www.gmc-uk.org/education/standards-guidance-and-curricula/guidance/shape-of-training-review), the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) is reviewing its post-graduate curriculum. Shape of Training mandates a generic professional capabilities framework, beyond learning the technical aspects of medicine. It focusses on professional values, actions and aspirations, to help practitioners become ‘dedicated’ doctors. Dedication in work echoes generations-old concerns about the character of doctors: under Henry VIII, parliamentary discussions when founding the College of Physicians of London emphasised that doctors’ necessary qualities included ‘gravity, learning and discretion’. We argue that critical thinking about dilemmas in the past, and better understanding of our history, can spur us on to achieve the desired GMC professional attributes and improve psychiatric practice today.

Houston highlights the dangers of a limited understanding of the history of psychiatry. He identifies two aspects of what he labels as ‘pastism’. Positive pastism is that all was good, such as holistic ‘moral treatment’ in the early 18th century asylums. Negative pastism is ‘the notion that everything in the [psychiatric] past was “bad, weird, or confused”’, unscientific and lacking evidence, even when in keeping with the science of the times. Pastism-type generalisations do not do justice to the history of psychiatry.

The history of psychiatry is not an inevitable progression from bad to good. There were bad and even cruel practices, but others were exemplary. Modern problems in psychiatry are not solely a function of new difficulties, often being revisitations of old problems, for which studying their history can inform current debate, albeit without providing solutions. Scandals of abuse of vulnerable people recur, and good practices from the past have been lost, such as holistic mental health teams for older people. The recent opioid crisis has confirmed that epidemics of iatrogenic harm are neither restricted to history, nor limited to psychiatry. Through better understanding of our collective professional history, we may be able to develop our value systems, improve the services we provide and help safeguard against future harmful practice.

The College and external organisations, including the BBC and other national media, have sought advice from the History of Psychiatry Special Interest Group (HoPSIG) on historical aspects of psychiatry. Providing accurate information and insights into past practice can influence public perceptions of psychiatry today. The College has recently appointed a Historian in Residence, who takes a lead on these requests. A recent College request to HoPSIG concerned the eponymous use of the name of Hans Asperger. Asperger worked as a paediatrician in Vienna and published his research on autistic psychopathy during the Nazi era. Recent historical research has established that he directly referred children to his close colleagues in charge of the wards that functioned as part of the child euthanasia programme, in the enactment of the Nazi legal, medical and political ideology of ending ‘life unworthy of life’. Engagement with the historical background to the Asperger eponym, in the context of clinical teaching about intellectual disability, would provide opportunities to consider the meaning of being a dedicated doctor. How would we have responded in Asperger’s situation, and how might we respond if faced by an ideologically powerful but abusive regime in the future? Discussion within the RCPsych about Asperger has pointed to the need for training in the ethics of psychiatric practice: historians can contribute to that process, alongside others.

Ideologies within mental health may be forces for better, for worse or both. They may arise from society and its politics, within

Key words

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Learning the history of psychiatry

The syllabus for the Membership of the College (MRCPsych) includes facts about historical roots of psychotherapeutic approaches, psychopharmacology and theories of human development. Facts provide a simplistic chronology of what happened when, rather than arguing the more important and contextualised questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’. Lectures given on MRCPsych courses rarely mention more than the chronologies, but a grasp of appropriate methodology alongside the facts is vital to critical analysis of historical evidence, just as it is for evaluating scientific data. University history of medicine and medical humanities departments already work with undergraduate medical schools. They offer rich learning opportunities about the broad history of psychiatry and its value to practice, often using creative writing and visual art activities based on historical documents and artefacts, to enhance empathy by better understanding patients’ cultural perspectives. Change Minds in Norwich (https://changeminds.org.uk/) and Whittingham Lives in Preston (http://whittinghamlives.org.uk/) have both utilised former mental hospital archives to engage local people with historically based creative activities. Similar models could provide ways forward for psychiatric education.

In our experience, trainee psychiatrists are more likely to engage positively with historical material and associated ethical or other issues when these are presented as part of an interdisciplinary approach to the medical humanities and integrated into learning about clinical disorders. We anticipate, in our patients’ encounters historically determined and still widely prevalent societal attitudes and perils. Learning about history reflects and respects the diverse backgrounds of psychiatrists, their colleagues and patients, and is underpinned by GMC and College values. Our practices today will be judged in the history books of tomorrow.

Declarations of interest

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Correspondence: Graham Ash. Email: gmas@doctors.org.uk

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