

Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN and ALAN LEE

The Antidepressant Era

By David Healy. 1997. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press. 317 pp. £26.50 (hb). ISBN 0-674-03957-2

At most major psychopharmacology meetings in recent years Dr Healy has been a familiar sight, pursuing with tape recorder an interview with an elderly person. This has been arranged in advance, with much tactful persistence and willingness of the interviewer to travel a long distance for the purpose. By background himself a psychopharmacologist, Dr Healy has found his vocation as the unofficial oral historian of psychopharmacology. He has published two books of interviews with psychopharmacologists.

Here he sets out not to present interviews, but to describe and set in context the development of the antidepressants. He starts early, rather too broadly, with Greek concepts of disease, and their 19th-century evolution. He gets into his stride with an enlightening account of the origins of the modern pharmaceutical industry. He describes in detail the early and initially quite uncertain work with the first modern antidepressants, imipramine and iproniazid, dwelling on the people involved and putting in the picture many more of them than usual, drawing from his fund of interviews. This makes lively reading and, prone to partiality though it may often be, is necessary given the age of the key figures. He moves to the introduction of controlled trials in psychopharmacology and in depression, including the battle between the enthusiastic pioneers and the sceptical methodologists as to their place, to the evolution of neuropharmacology of the monoamines which the antidepressants fuelled, and on to the newer drugs. He then moves more widely to DSM-III, issues of psychotherapy, behaviour therapy and the obligation to use available effective treatments.

Dr Healy tells a good story and the book is well written. He is a sceptic and tends to side with the sceptics, and he sets the scene too broadly in places, such as in matters of disease concepts, going over old

ground. Some aspects, such as the rise of long-term treatment (quite a story in itself), are largely missing. Best are the accounts of individuals, which have the feel of actuality. His sympathy is with the unsung underdog in the chancy game of attribution of credit.

When reading this book I felt like Molière's M. Jourdain, who learned that he had always spoken prose. I have lived history. I started training in psychiatry in 1962, just a few years into the antidepressant era. As a young researcher in the USA in the later 1960s I met many of the people in the book, and I have a small role in it myself. By and large Dr Healy has got the history right, although there are some places where the urge to follow a theme has led his interpretations astray. I can recommend this book, both to the nostalgic older reader and to the younger one who wants to understand how we got to where we are today.

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From Cradle to Grave: Fifty Years of the NHS

By Geoffrey Rivett. 1997. London: King's Fund. 506 pp. £25. ISBN 1-85717-148-9

The powerful face of Aneurin Bevan in his prime looks out from the cover of this historical panorama of his greatest achievement, the National Health Service (NHS). Revisionist historians who take nothing for granted, now dispute that it was national wartime solidarity which lay behind the genesis of a free, universal service. Well, they would, wouldn't they?

This long and comprehensive work finds a prominent place for developments in mental health services during the half-century. This is not surprising, since at the inception of the NHS in 1948, some 44% of beds were in mental or mental deficiency

hospitals. Rivett, who was first a general practitioner and then a medical civil servant, points out that the decision to give each of these hospitals a management committee of its own, rather than combining them in a group with general hospitals, helped to prolong their isolation and peculiar culture. It was not until the 1974 reorganisation, which deserves a better press than it has had, that this administrative separation was ended.

Landmarks such as the Mental Health Act 1995, the 1962 Hospital Plan, and the scandals in long-stay hospitals (leading to the Hospital Advisory Service) all receive appropriate mention. Rivett skilfully weaves into the political and administrative story evidence of the importance of therapeutic and technical advances, as they occur. For psychiatry, these include successive psychopharmacological discoveries, starting with neuroleptics in the early 1950s, the evolution of brain imaging, and the first direct effects of new genetic knowledge. Mental health services have almost certainly changed more than those of any other branch of medicine since 1948, most particularly in terms of the environments in which they are practised. Over 150 000 mental hospital beds in the early years of the NHS have fallen drastically in number, and have largely been redistributed into general hospitals and other settings. Rivett shows appropriate caution in passing judgement on this transformation.

The style is clear and straightforward, to an extent that the ideologically minded might regard as Whiggish, but, as a doctor rather than a historian, the author has seen the benefits which both the NHS and scientific advances have brought to ordinary people. From the 1980s, though, the story becomes much more complex in political terms as the substantial degree of common ground which had existed for decades is rudely shattered. Rivett avoids taking sides so far as he can, but worrying concerns about the effects of 'reforms' cannot altogether be hidden. One conclusion which might be drawn is that the efforts that have gone over the 50 years into committees, working parties, inquiries, and now 'focus groups' might have been drastically curtailed. Few of them have led to any practical or helpful action, yet at this moment, yet another inquiry is going on into the provision of health services for London.

While acknowledging what has been achieved, Rivett is cautious about the