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Tavistock and Portman Centenary

Celebrating 100 Years of the Tavistock and Portman

The Tavistock and Portman
100
 YEARS
 1920 to 2020

Glenn Gossling

For 100 years the Tavistock and Portman Clinics have worked in their respective fields in mental health, showing an enduring commitment to public service and social justice.

At the start of the twentieth century, prior to the NHS, medical care was largely unaffordable, even for the working poor. Victorian bedlams dominated mental health care – overcrowded warehouses whose doctors, known as ‘alienists’, worked as glorified medical gaolers. Mental disorder was conceived biologically, as a sign of ‘degenerate stock’ or ‘moral’ disorder that was rarely curable. It is against this backdrop that the achievements of the Tavistock and Portman Clinics should be seen.

The Tavistock Clinic opened on 27 September 1920. Its founder, Dr Hugh

Crichton-Miller, wanted to provide civilians with treatments similar to those he and colleagues had developed for shell-shocked soldiers during World War 1.

At the start of World War 1 ‘shell-shock’ was not well understood. Doctors gave physical explanations, such as punctate haemorrhages in the brain. The military responded to apparent cowardice with discipline and summary execution, handing out over 3,000 death sentences. Doctors like Hugh Crichton-Miller, William Rivers and Charles Myers took up Freud’s theory of the unconscious to challenge prevailing views. The ‘British school’ argued that not all neurosis was produced by sexual factors, relating shellshock ‘directly, to the strains and shocks of warfare’. Freud later revised his theories too, writing ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ in 1920.

‘The military responded to apparent cowardice with discipline and summary execution, handing out over 3,000 death sentences’

The original staff of Tavistock Clinic felt it their duty to give psychological help to civilians, particularly people who otherwise could not afford it. In the 1920s, Clinic, doctors and therapists worked on a voluntary basis. Patients were charged

a nominal fee of 5 shillings (this fee was often waived altogether). To fund the Clinic, Hugh Crichton-Miller sought subscriptions from wealthy individuals and organised popular educational talks for both the public and medical profession. Even so, he often dipped into his own pocket to meet the Clinic’s overheads.

In its early days, the Tavistock Clinic famously sought to have ‘no doctrine’ and developed an ‘eclectic school’ of thought. Freud’s notion of sadism was challenged in favour of an instinct of aggression, giving notions of self-preservation priority over libidinal drives, and relating anxiety to infantile dread of insecurity – termed ‘dependence’ or ‘the loss of mother’.

The Portman Clinic grew from Grace Pailthorpe’s research into criminology of the 1920s and sought to cure ‘delinquents’ through therapy, not punishment. Edward

Glover established the Portman as the clinical wing of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency. The first patient attended on 18 September 1933. Many Portman Clinic patients were unable to pay for treatment. Those with means were charged an initial consultation fee of £1, 1 shilling (a guinea) and 3 shillings for each subsequent session.

Links between the Tavistock and Portman Clinics existed from the outset. JA Hadfield had a key role in training and education at both. Wilfred Bion worked at both Clinics while studying under Hadfield, though Bion saw his first patient – a then unknown Irish writer called Samuel Beckett – at the Tavistock.

‘The Portman Clinic grew from Grace Pailthorpe’s research into criminology of the 1920s and sought to cure “delinquents” through therapy, not punishment’

Both organisations survived the Great Depression in the 1930s and the destruction of their premises in World War 2, during the Blitz.

During World War 2, J R Rees, then Director of the Tavistock Clinic, became Consultant Psychiatrist to the Army, responsible for the mental health of three million personnel. Under the pressures of war, new alliances in psychiatry and psychoanalysis created the ‘invisible college’.

The military adopted more psychologically informed training and selection methods to ensure that conscripts likely to break-down were no longer sent to the front line. And the British Army’s pervasive class prejudice was tackled with new officer selection methods, including Wilfred Bion’s ‘leaderless groups’. Later Bion, with John Rickman, initiated the short-lived ‘Northfield Experiment’, transforming a conventional military hospital into a therapeutic community.

After World War 2, both the Tavistock and the Portman were keen to join the NHS and actively serve the public good. Bion initiated ‘Operation Phoenix’ reforms, to make the Tavistock Clinic ready to enter the NHS. Members of the ‘invisible college’ who had served in the military became the core of the new Clinic. An era of egalitarianism followed, with

staff elected to senior positions, staff lists printed without distinction of seniority or profession, and identical salaries paid to medical and non-medical full-time staff.

Joining the NHS enabled the organisation to work with a much wider patient group and so develop expertise and innovation. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth developed Attachment Theory and Esther Bick, Infant Observation. Bion’s innovations in group and social psychology led to the founding of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. First, Michael Balint (with his ‘Balint Groups’) and then Alexis Brook took the work of the Clinic to the wider NHS as well as back to the community and GP surgeries. Marital guidance and organisational consultancy were added to the Clinic’s non-medical roster.

The Portman also developed links with prisons, judiciary and probation services. From Mervyn Glasser’s seminal concept of the ‘Core Complex’ of the 1970s, grew a range of understandings and treatments for delinquency and perversion. The Portman remains a world leader in forensic psychotherapy.

In 1994, Anton Obholzer and Rob Hale led the Tavistock and Portman to become a single NHS Trust. The Trust’s role as an educational institution expanded, developing university-recognised

post graduate training and a Master’s programme. Now, a global Digital Academy has been launched.

Other innovations include: David Malan’s brief psychotherapy, the Trauma Unit, the Returning Families Unit for cases related to violent extremism, the Trust’s approach to integrated care and multi-agency working, which became the national ‘Thrive’ programme, and the Trust’s gender clinics, which have national status and international expertise.

Over the past 100 years, mental health services have gone through a more radical transformation than any other part of the health system. The Tavistock and Portman contributed a century of innovative thought on human development as well as skills to support and help a wide cross-section of the community.

Glenn Gossling is a communications professional and former freelance writer. He joined the Tavistock and Portman in 2018 and has been researching its history since starting. During his career he has won several national awards for his communications work. He studied English literature and philosophy at university and has wide ranging interests in political history, poststructuralism and post-modern literature.