

One day psychiatry is going to have to face up to its long-standing deception of the general public

In September 2003, a group of mental health service users in California went on a hunger strike for 21 days. They were protesting against the diagnoses they had been given and the medications they were being forced to take. Their challenge was simple – demonstrate to us what are the alleged biochemical abnormalities we are suffering from and how the treatments you give us correct them, and then we will take the drugs you prescribe us.

When US president George Bush told the world that Iraq was a danger to world security because of its possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), he demonstrated that power is more important than truth. Impressive presentations were put forward and many claims were made about Iraq having an active WMD programme. We now know all these claims to be false, although we don't know how much leaders like Bush and Tony Blair believed their own propaganda or knew they were committing a deception. What we do know is that it was the version of reality of the most powerful that prevailed.

For well over 100 years we have been searching for evidence that the conditions psychiatrists have labelled as psychiatric disorders and/or mental illnesses are caused by biological abnormalities in the brain. We have found nothing more than bits and pieces of inconsistent, circumstantial evidence. Each new technological invention (such as CT scans and other neuro-imaging devices) draws the same blanks. Those in power, however, continue to sell us the same story: 'We haven't found it yet because we're not looking in the right places yet;' 'We just need more time – we are confident that eventually we will find the evidence;' 'Just because we haven't found the evidence yet, it doesn't mean it isn't there;' 'You have to understand, the brain is a large territory to search, so it's a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack, but we are confident that our teams of brain inspectors have found enough evidence already to indicate that these abnormalities are there, somewhere.'

Despite this spectacular failure by psychiatry to back its biological theories with scientific fact, we have come to believe that mental illnesses exist as brain abnormalities and physical treatments 'treat' them. Here again, we have a group of high status, powerful figures who are

perceived to have the authority to define what has become accepted wisdom.

It does not stop there. The links between this and the Bush story go further. People's emotional distress is now big business. There has been a huge growth in the profits of the drug industry in recent years, which has continued – indeed strengthened – at a time when other industries have experienced considerable economic hardship. Many of the big, blockbuster drugs are psychiatric drugs, and the pharmaceutical industry knows full well that it benefits enormously from biological psychiatry, which has given it the tools to exploit human suffering for the purposes of profit. This year the Bush government announced plans for a national programme to screen all children for signs of psychiatric disorder – a plan that cynics rightly regard as an open door to the pharmaceutical industry to fish for new customers. There are close ties between George Bush and the US pharmaceutical industry: many of the big pharmaceuticals are major contributors to the US president's election campaign and to the Republic Party.¹

So what did the American Psychiatric Association say in answer to the Californian hunger strikers' request for facts? The best these esteemed psychiatrists could come up with was to tell them to go and look for the evidence in the textbooks. But what else could they say? Biological psychiatry simply does not have the scientific evidence to answer the hunger strikers' challenge.

As we discovered with WMDs in Iraq, you can fool all of the people some of the time; you can fool some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. One day, psychiatry is going to have to face up to its long-standing deception of the general public (whether deliberate or otherwise). It will have to face up to the unnecessary, and sometimes brutal, suffering this has caused so many people. Then maybe we can set up a truth and reconciliation committee to allow psychiatrists to talk truthfully about their practices and apologise for any suffering caused. After this we can finally begin decommissioning, and millions of bottles of largely ineffective and highly dangerous pills can be handed in to be destroyed. When that day arrives the critics of western psychiatry will finally be able to sleep easy in their beds.

1 News. *British Medical Journal* 2004; 328: 1458 [bmj.com]

The monthly column by consultant child psychiatrist Sami Timimi that tests the boundaries of mental health politics and practice