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## **My Life as a Psychiatrist**

John Salinsky<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Balint Groups Leader, former President of The Balint Society UK: [jvsalinsky@aol.com](mailto:jvsalinsky@aol.com)

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I should say, to begin with, that I was never actually a psychiatrist. But I did, as a medical student, spend a month attached to the medical staff of the Warneford Hospital in Oxford. My girlfriend was a student at one of the Oxford colleges, so Oxford was the obvious place to go for my four-week 'elective' period. In any case, I was interested in psychological medicine and intended to specialise in psychiatry when I qualified.

The Warneford was a very special hospital, founded in 1826 as The Warneford Lunatic Asylum, whose mission was to provide something like the atmosphere of a gentleman's country house. Its purpose would be 'the accommodation of lunatics from the higher classes of society', (later changed to 'the educated classes'). 'So reassuring', their families must have murmured as they signed the paper that would relieve of them of the burden of the problem relative. Of course, by the time I checked in for my four-week stay in 1965, things had changed considerably. Many of the patients were students of the University who were suffering from depression, for a variety of reasons; or acute anxiety about the prospect of sitting exams for which they had done little preparation. It seemed to the consultants that these young patients (all of them men) would feel a good deal of empathy with a friendly young student and, indeed, they seemed to be very happy for me to take their histories and get to know them.

Of course, they would still have to study and sit their university exams and for this the hospital provided a psychologist called May Davidson to act as their tutor. She was happy to act as tutor to any student, whatever their subject. She must have been not only a polymath but a brilliant teacher because her group's exam results were said to be better than those of most of the Oxford colleges.

As well as clerking the new patients, I was allowed to sit in with one or other of the three consultants while they did their outpatient clinics. My favourite consultant was a very genial man called Dr Seymour Spencer. He told me that he was Jewish by birth and had studied the Hebrew Torah in depth as a young man

but had subsequently become a Roman Catholic. In those days, there were quite a number of young women who needed the endorsement of a psychiatrist in order to have a termination of pregnancy. Their religion would determine to which of the consultants they would be allotted. If the patient was Catholic or Jewish, she went to Dr Spencer, while the Protestants were referred to one or other of the two C of E psychiatrists. If the patient was Jewish, Dr Spencer told her that she could certainly have a termination if she did not feel able to be a mother just yet. If she was a Catholic, on the other hand, she was reminded that abortion was a Sin, which he could not condone. I asked him why he had given up the Jewish faith himself, and with a smile and a shake of his head he said, 'impossible to practice'. I have to say that I enjoyed the sessions with Dr Spencer who, despite his idiosyncratic rules, was very amiable and great fun.

During ward rounds, I was introduced to some of the more colourful long-stay patients. The staff were very fond of one rather dignified man who believed that he was the rightful King of England, Edward the Ninth. They told me that he was usually quiet and well-behaved, but every so often he would escape from the ward and make his way by bus and train to Buckingham Palace where he informed the duty policeman that he was Edward the Ninth and had come to London to claim the Crown. When this didn't achieve anything, he said he was currently living at the Warneford Hospital in Oxford and could he please be taken back? But, how did he get out? On one occasion (it was said), his aggrieved doctor asked the other patients, 'who left that door unlocked?' And the patients chorused, 'you did, Doctor'.

Of course, these stories had become legends and maybe they were not all true: but they certainly enlivened my stay.

I was able to follow up some of the patients and to see some striking improvements. One middle-aged woman was so depressed that she insisted on sleeping on the floor, because, she said, she didn't deserve to sleep in a bed.

Antidepressants were no help, so the next routine step was electroconvulsive therapy. This was given under a very light anaesthetic and seemed quite brutal. But, on the next day, the patient was sitting up in bed and saying, 'I can't believe I wanted to sleep on the floor!' Occasionally, it was decided to treat a depressed patient by 'insulin coma'. To me this seemed drastic, though I didn't question it. Whether it was at all effective I never discovered.

My accommodation in the hospital was quite good; at least I had a bedroom of my own. On one occasion, after an evening with my girlfriend, I returned to the hospital quite late and used my own key to the front door. I was immediately challenged by the fierce Night Sister who said, 'What's your name, which ward are you from, and what are you doing out of bed?' I explained who I was and she decided, reluctantly I thought, not to throw me out.

My meals were provided in the doctors' dining-room where I formed an alliance with James, the registrar. This was necessary because all the consultants were quite right-wing in their political views, whereas James and I were both Democratic Socialists. When our seniors expressed their views, from behind their *Daily Telegraph*, we two would show each other inflammatory articles in our copies of *The Guardian*.

I enjoyed my stay at the Warneford, and I learned a lot; although most of it is now of historical interest. Afterwards, back at my teaching hospital in London, we students were each asked by a committee of three consultants what speciality we wanted to go into when we qualified. When I said: 'psychiatry', they all found this very amusing. Then, they grew serious. The one on the right said, 'all right, but you should do some proper medicine first and get your MRCP.' And the one on the left, who was a surgeon, told me I should then get my FRCS as well. And if I still wanted to be a psychiatrist? He shrugged and gave me up as lost. I suppose they thought they were trying to save me from joining the least distinguished branch of the profession.

Well, I did do some medical jobs, and I did get my MRCP after a struggle and with some help from the wonderful evening classes given by the brilliant renegade, Dr Maurice Pappworth. We all enjoyed his scathing remarks about well-known consultants. But I ended up as a GP and soon joined my first Balint group. Looking back, I am certain I made some very good decisions. And the girlfriend? Reader, I married her!