

THE CHEMICAL GAG: WHY PSYCHIATRISTS USE NEUROLEPTICS

by Peter Lehmann

Berlin: Antipsychiatrieverlag, 1990;
D.M.29.90

Having himself been treated for psychosis in a West German Psychiatric Hospital for several months, Peter Lehmann emerged from this experience as a radical opponent of psychiatry in general, with a profound dislike of psychiatrists, and deeply suspicious of their motives. Being also a sociologist with obvious academic abilities, he then started his detailed research into psychiatric practice and particularly into the effects of treatment with neuroleptics. The book which resulted from this research is unfortunately only available in German. Nevertheless, it should be compulsory reading for anyone working with psychiatric patients.

In 403 pages, using 151 drawings and photographs, and quoting 1157 references, Peter Lehmann has compiled a most disturbing collection of material on his subject. In a first view of the book (and to the reader with little command of the German language) the pictures give a most vivid account of the variety of cruelties used as a "cure" for psychiatric symptoms in the dark old days of early psychiatry. Thank heavens, we sigh, those days are over! But are they really? Can we afford to sit back, relax and look at those pictures with the reassuring feeling of living in the more enlightened days of modern scientific treatment in psychiatry? Peter Lehmann could not disagree more with the notion of enlightenment and throughout his book makes it definitely hard for his readers to maintain a positive and humanitarian image of modern neuroleptic based psychiatric treatment.

According to the main thesis of the book, neuroleptic medication causes the same suffering and harm as the varied tortures used by psychiatrists in centuries gone by. Hence the gruesome pictures to be found scattered throughout the text. All those ancient tortures have been inflicted on patients by psychiatrists, always with the "best of intentions" and maintaining they constitute a "successful cure", just as neuroleptic medication is viewed today. This attitude is reflected in the language used by psychiatrists, and is not to be trusted, for it does not represent accurately the reality of patients' suffering. Again, the pictures serve as a visual reminder of this. In addition, quotation marks constantly point towards the different interpretations of reality, for example, "patients": really victims of psychiatrists; "treatment" or "cure": really a torture; "side effects" of medication: really imminent main effects of neuroleptics; "medication": really rather more a poison or another instrument of torture, etc.

You may not agree with Peter Lehmann's view of the psychiatric world, but the sheer mass of evidence collected in support of it is certainly enough to induce doubts in the most faithful believer in modern psychiatric treatment.

The historical section of the book takes the reader through the development of psychiatry from the Middle Ages, through the 19th century to the crimes of psychiatry during the fascist dictatorship in Germany and

the 20th century inventions of ECT, insulin shock and lobotomy. This history finds its logical conclusion in the invention and application of neuroleptics; their effects being described on the following 200 pages. It is impossible to give an account of even a fraction of the (exclusively damaging) consequences of these substances. A brief view of the index of these chapters alone reveals that not a single aspect of cognitive/ emotional functioning and not a single organ of the human body remains unaffected by neuroleptic medication.

It is worth noticing that the statements on all these damaging effects are conscientiously quoted from respectable psychiatric and medical reviews and articles. Unfortunately, only a small percentage of the articles are available in English. Reading up some of the references does not help one to feel more relaxed about this book. It certainly left me with a very uneasy feeling whenever psychiatrists take decisions on neuroleptic medication on ward rounds. In addition, this book opened my eyes about just how many of the difficulties our patients on long-stay psychiatric wards are experiencing are really due to the medication they have been taking for years.

This is where I see the real value of this book. As for the question posed in the subtitle, I found it difficult, or at least of little help, to follow the author's explanation: being obsessed with power, psychiatrists are prepared to do anything to maintain and extend their total control over individual human beings and over as much of society as possible. However, one may ask, why else would they go on using neuroleptics in spite of all that is known about their damaging effects?

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