

the 2,200 calories a day recommended by the Department of Health. Most use up fewer than

at a time eating, exercising and sleeping in these small sealed rooms, which are specially

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The deluded patients who live in a world of doubles

FORBIDDEN lovers stalk most people's dreams. But consider the case of one woman who was convinced in her waking hours that her bedfellow was not her husband. She was enjoying the attentions of a series of charming cads. This is just one example of misidentification which can be found in the pages of learned psychiatric journals, some as bizarre, others quite mundane.

Dr Geoffrey Wallis, a psychiatrist in Bingley, Yorkshire, has scoured the literature for descriptions of patients who believe that someone close to them (say their wife, or their brother or even their doctor) has been ousted by an exact double. However persuasive the argument, they refuse to accept that they are mistaken.

The tricks that doubles play have a long mythical and literary tradition. The Greek gods were often popping up in disguise, trying to catch us lesser mortals out, while both *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors* depend on look-alike twins for the resolution of their plots.

People who use a double in a pathological way are said to be

suffering from Capgras syndrome, described in 1923 by two French physicians, Capgras and Reboul-Lachaux. One of Dr Wallis's patients, for example, was a man in his early thirties who was utterly convinced that his mother and father had been replaced by two wicked impersonators. So strong was his conviction that he claimed that he would murder the stand-in parents. But, interestingly, like many sufferers of the syndrome who feel the substitutes are poor replicas of the originals, he did not act on his threats.

This negative aspect of the misidentification (that the replacement is evil or second-best) has given psychiatrists some room for explanation. A patient who feels ambivalent, about his wife, for example, and dare not express his doubts directly, is able to complain about and criticise her

faults seen in her double without fear of reprisal and without suffering any guilt.

The misidentification is not, however, restricted to people. One woman became extremely upset when she thought her budgerigar had been replaced. But the new bird did not have such fine feathers as the original

The stand-in is felt to be evil or second-best

and the woman was inconsolable. Another woman was devastated when a favourite piece of jewellery went missing and a tawdry copy appeared on her dressing table, and a third patient did not believe some letters had really been written by her daughter.

A trigger for the development of the delusion can be a slight change in the relative's appearance. One daughter did not consciously recognise that her father was growing old because she saw him regularly. They were then

separated for a short time and when they met again she registered his changed appearance for the first time. But she wanted to hang on to the youthful version she had nurtured in her imagination, so claimed that he had been replaced by an elderly double.

Although published examples of Capgras Syndrome are rare, and less than 150 have been described this century, most psychiatrists believe that it is probably more common. The syndrome does not develop spontaneously: all patients have a history of psychiatric illness and so the misidentification may be just part of a whole range of other delusions.

In Dr Wallis's analysis about two-thirds of the patients are women. Roughly 70 per cent suffer from primary schizophrenia and a further 15 per cent from depression, while the rest have some physical problem like epilepsy or have had a brain injury. Patients cannot be talked out of their delusions — only when the underlying illnesses are treated successfully will they recover.

Olivia Timbs

Using parents on the wards