Whatever Happened to Our Legacy of Caring?

By Donald W. Hammersley, M.D.

Over time, the ebb and flow of caring in our society are reflected in its institutions, including those for the mentally ill and disabled. In 1844, when the organization that later became APA was founded, there was a growing awareness of the need to provide the mentally ill with a safe haven in a supportive, caring environment as an alternative to residing in local jails and poorhouses or living as homeless scavengers. The moral treatment philosophy triumphed over punitive, repressive, exclusionary, and stigmatizing practices.

Dr. Hammersley is a former deputy medical director of APA and was instrumental in the development of APA's hospital and community psychiatry services.

APA's founders were medical superintendents of public and private mental hospitals. These physicians were drawn together not by any aspiration to form an organization of a new profession of psychiatrists, but by concern about the care of the mentally ill. Imbued with the tradition of caring in medical practice, they were drawn to the challenge of developing and managing specialized residential institutions just for the mentally ill. They believed in small facilities with carefully laid out and furnished patient areas. They thought a location in the country was ideal, as long as it was conveniently accessible for visitors. Healthful food, good hygiene, useful activity, and a caring, supportive staff along with an environment free of noxious influence and stress were all specified in the early publications of the founders.

These medical superintendents provided the roots or foundation from which organized psychiatry evolved—the deep concern and humane caring for the mentally ill.

One hundred years later, a human tragedy became apparent across the country in the form of huge, overcrowded, understaffed institutions that warehoused several hundred thousand patients at bare subsistence levels. The exposés of these snakepit conditions in the 1940's and 1950's brought renewed public awareness and commitment to address the plight of the mentally ill. When World War II was over,

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Harvard Group Reviews Psychiatrist

Concern about inappropriate treatment, university reputation, spark probe

Controversial Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, M.D., is under review by a special committee at the university, according to a May 4 report in the *New York Times.*

Mack has drawn national attention for writing a best-selling book, *Abduction: Human Encounters With Aliens,* about psychiatric patients who say they were abducted and, in many cases, raped, by space aliens. The book was first published in April 1994 and republished in a revised, paperback edition this May in which Mack responded to critics.

A spokesperson for Harvard Medical School said there would be no official comment on the matter. Mack's publicists for the paperback edition of his book at Ballantine Publishing failed to return a call from *Psychiatric News,* and a secretary for Mack's attorney, Roderick MacLeish Jr., said MacLeish was tied up in a trial.

The paperback edition includes a new preface and appendix to address questions of credibility and alternative interpretations of the experiences that patients described to Mack. But Mack remains firmly committed to the thesis that his patients had genuine encounters with alien beings.

The review committee is reportedly headed by Arnold Relman, M.D., former editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine* and professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School. The committee was set up one year ago by Daniel Tosteson, M.D., dean of the medical school, and has since held more than 30 closed hearings, according to the *New York Times.*

Three members of the committee who spoke on background to the *Times* said that the committee would soon present a report highly critical of Mack. According to one committee member, Tosteson had expressed concern both about Harvard's reputation and "that the cases Dr. Mack described might have been a result of hallucinations for which his treatment was not appropriate," wrote *Times* reporter William Honan.

In his book, Mack says that he had colleagues review the material. He also contends in an appendix to the new edition that "psychiatric examinations and numerous psychological tests have failed to reveal forms of mental illness that could conceivably explain the abduction phenomenon." He goes on to discuss and rebut possible explanations other than actual abductions having occurred.

Submissions Due

Submissions for posters and multimedia sessions at the Institute on Psychiatric Services (formerly Institute on Hospital and Community Psychiatry) are due June 19. The institute will be held October 6 to 10 in Boston. Forms may be obtained by contacting the IPS coordinator at APA, 1400 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005; (202) 682-6345.