



The Northern California Psychiatric Physician

*A Publication of the Northern California Psychiatric Society • A District Branch of the American Psychiatric Association
Winner of the 1995 APA Newsletter of the Year Award*

May/June 1996

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 37TH ANNUAL MEETING & SCIENTIFIC PROGRAM

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE SPACE STATION: A BREAKFAST WITH JOHN MACK, MD

by Susan Downs, MD, MPH

Imagine your patient tells you he was abducted by alien creatures with large eyes and teleported into a spacecraft for breeding and other scientific procedures. Imagine further that your patient tells you he/she has several alien offspring. Do you reach for your prescription pad or telephone to arrange a hospitalization? Not necessarily, according to Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, who spoke at the annual NCPS conference in March.

Pulitzer prize winning author Dr. Mack interviewed over one hundred people using conscious recall and hypnosis. Over 76 met his criteria for experiencing an alien abduction experience as described in his recent book, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. He found that these patients did not fit into any psychiatric category that came close to explaining what he observed. No case has been shown to have a cause other than what the person reported. There was no "encounter-prone personality" or obvious pattern of family structure or dynamics.

Such experiences fly in the face of rational scientific thought on which Western medicine is based.



John Mack, MD at the Annual Meeting.

Yet, as we have learned from cross-cultural psychiatry, our procrustean nosology as contained in our Burgundy Bibles, cannot be applied to other cultures without impunity. DSM-IV is the gold standard only for what we know and have already experienced. To apply DSM-IV (which itself is constantly changing), to different cultures may define pathology where there is indeed none. Yet, on the other hand, we must be careful not to embrace another procrustean nosology in its place.

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The basic phenomena associated with abductions seem to be consistent worldwide. Dr. Mack showed tapes from African school girls and a proud, but embarrassed, Zulu chief who report similar experiences to the abductees in the US and Western Europe. Abductees report seeing a beam of light and humanoid beings; the experience of being paralyzed and taken through walls into an enclosure and subjected to a variety of procedures with the creation of a "hybrid" species; and communication of powerful messages about man's aggressiveness and waste destroying the planet. Scenes of the earth devastated by nuclear holocaust, lifeless polluted landscapes and apocalyptic images of giant earthquakes, firestorms, floods and even fracture of the planet are somehow conveyed to the abductee. Abductees report communication without words and a feeling of connection to their captors. They also report a profound spiritual and emotional transformation.

Concerns were raised as to whether Dr. Mack adhered to the standards of scholarly research and whether patients were exploited or subjected to harm. There had been no peer review. An Ad Hoc Committee at Harvard found that he had not violated the standards of conduct of clinical practice and clinical investigation. While this was not a disciplinary procedure or a question of academic freedom, Dr. Mack had to pay over \$100,000 to defend his research during these proceedings.

Another criticism came when a Boston freelance writer feigned symptoms and fabricated experiences in order to be in Dr. Mack's group. As we learned from Rosenhan's work on eight pseudo-patients who feigned symptoms and were admitted to psychiatric hospitals, behavior can be misleading and clinicians can be fooled.

Our paradigms of understanding evolve and expand over time. Freud explored uncharted terrain when he postulated that there was an unconscious. What a blow to mankind to learn that we are not even in charge of our own psyches! Jung delved further into the unmeasurable when he introduced the concept of the collective unconscious. Copernicus and Galileo challenged the world view by postulating that the earth was not the center of the universe. This severe blow to the collective egocentrism of humanity was met with the desire to burn Copernicus at the stake and to try Galileo for heresy. What will be the next paradigm and what insult will it have to the collective human ego?

Throughout time, the spiritual has been separated from the physical; the subjective and unmeasurable have been separated from the objective which is measured through scientific methodology. Dr. Mack's work brings him face to face with a mystery for which he thinks science does not have an answer. The abductees return with powerful moving messages about our destructiveness to this planet. Could

Dr. Mack be correct in his theory that alien abduction phenomenon may be a kind of spiritual outreach program for the spiritually impaired? Could he be correct when he posits that we and the beings come from a common Source with love as the core of the cosmos? Could he be right when he concludes that we need to transcend the separateness that disconnects us from nature so that we can enjoy the unity and sacredness of creation? These are not questions that will be answered through logical deductive reasoning alone. These questions demand a merging of the subjective and objective. ♦

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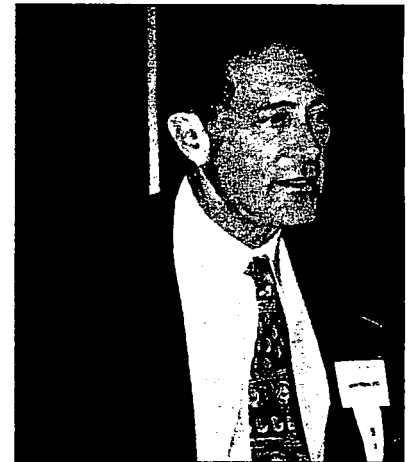
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The Editors congratulate Bruce S. Victor, MD and the Professional Education Committee for the excellent program at this year's Annual Meeting at the Silverado Country Club in Napa, March 22-24. We greatly appreciate the summaries of presentations provide by participants; coverage of the major sessions begins in this issue and will continue in July.

REVIEW OF SYMPOSIUM ON THE CHALLENGING PATIENT: MEDICAL-LEGAL ISSUES

T.B. Ghosh, MD, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UCSF School of Medicine, Private Practice, San Francisco and Marin

The lead-off cartoon depicted an apologetic attorney saying, "I am a member of the legal profession, but not a lawyer in the pejorative sense."



Drs. Renée Binder and Thomas Guthell respond to audience questions.

Indeed, physicians often hold a pejorative view of the legal profession, partly stemming from concerns about malpractice suits. Subsequently, there are alternating feelings of undue concern and denial about medical-legal issues in clinical practice. This symposium

was offered as an update to remind NCPS members of basic medical-legal principles, followed by reviews on specific types of challenging patients that bring up medical-legal issues.

I began with a review of the principles of malpractice suits and offered explanations for standards of care: the need to obtain informed consent, the need to make the determination of patient competence, and the need to maintain good medical records. I also emphasized that though in malpractice suits "damage" to the patient must be established, such damage is not required for disciplinary action by the Medical Board.

Following my introductory comments, **Dr. Peter L. Forester**, Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at UCSF School of Medicine and Chair of Psychiatry at Alameda

County Medical Center, gave a very thoughtful presentation about suicidal patients and suicide risk management. He presented several of his own cases to highlight his points and emphasized the importance of strengthening the treatment alliance with the acutely suicidal patient regardless of the setting – outpatient, inpatient, or aftercare.

Then, **Dr. Renée L. Binder**, Professor of Psychiatry at UCSF School of Medicine and President Elect of NCPS, presented critical information about assaultive and violent

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