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Stigma

by Jackie Flanagan



In the 1930s psychiatrists were experimenting with insulin shock therapy to treat the mentally ill. Dr. Frederick

Banting, who discovered insulin, toured mental asylums across the country to observe the efficacy of the treatment. Imagining himself a patient in each hospital he visited, he sought to discover if it were a place where he could get well. Nowhere did he find a healing institution. The attitude in them was all wrong. The patients were treated as inferiors. They were not considered participants in the treatment process, partners in the decisions about their therapy. They were stripped of their rights and their dignity, dictated to by the doctors and nurses, rendered utterly helpless and dependent. More therapy went on in the patients' interactions with each other than with the medical staff, because the patients treated each other as equals.

In *Political Asylums*, Ron LaJeunesse tells several revealing stories like this. One is about an information meeting to garner support for the building of a subsidized apartment complex to house people with physical and mental disabilities in the neighbourhood. People were outraged, objecting strenuously and expressing fear for the safety of their children. Then a woman got up from her seat in the audience and went to the microphone. "I know you," she said. She was the pharmacist at the local drug store. "I fill your prescriptions for antidepressants, and tranquilizers and sleeping pills. Without our jobs, our families and our homes, all of us would perish. Give these people the same chance."

But people who suffer from mental illness are not given the same chance. Over Alberta's history the mentally ill have been incarcerated, electro-shocked, lobotomized, steril-

ized, drugged and "deinstitutionalized." When the best science was telling us not to isolate the mentally ill in huge rural asylums, the Alberta government rebuilt Ponoka at a cost of \$95,000,000—not 50 years ago, but in 2001. The hospital was Ponoka's largest employer and Ponoka's MLA was then-Minister of Health Halvar Jonson.

The Alberta Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health has advocated for expanded community services, decentralized and delivered through Alberta's regional health authorities. In April 2003 responsibility for community and facility-based mental health programs was transferred from the Alberta Mental Health Board to the nine health regions, where mental health services could be integrated with other health services. We can only hope that this will contribute to a more coherent system, including psychiatric wards in local hospitals with specially trained medical personnel and proactive community support.

Mental illness, often caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain, is a disease like any other, requiring varying degrees of medical intervention depending on its seriousness. But unlike other diseases, a terrible stigma attaches to it. When we pass the despised, dishevelled beggar on the street, we should know he may be ill and public policies may have put him there. Policies such as deinstitutionalization, government withdrawal from subsidized public housing and the bewildering incoherence in service delivery.

Let's put aside superstitions and fear and make an attempt to learn about and understand mental illness. Where would any of us be without our jobs, our homes, our families? What is required is not pity and patronizing, but real care and respect.

Jackie Flanagan