

Forensic Psychiatry in Its Time and Place

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Psychiatry has always both interested and frightened the general public in equal measure. Forensic psychiatry, when it deals with high-profile criminal cases, is even more within the public domain. Hence, public reaction, as expressed through the media and by politicians, can be intense. This dynamic relationship between the profession and the public is accepted and understood in one direction—that is, the response of the public to what the professions say and do. However, this relationship has been considered less often when it operates in the opposite direction. A further question that arises is the extent to which professionals are aware that they may be influenced by public attitudes. Professionals usually like to believe that they are applying their art dispassionately, taking account of evidence and a steadily increasing body of knowledge within the discipline. Surely matters are never quite so clear and simple. This editorial explores the extent to which professional practice may follow public opinion.

The events cited herein are from Scotland predominantly, but they are described in the belief that similar examples may be available in other countries and within other jurisdictions.

To set the scene, and with a relevance that will become apparent later, I start with a poem by Philip Larkin (1922–1985). He was a poet who is probably better known in Britain than in North America. He remains popular in the United Kingdom and was one of the most influential poets of his generation. He

had an ability to link personal events and incidents of everyday life with wider themes that have a much more fundamental significance. His poem *Annus Mirabilis* was written in 1964 and published in an anthology in 1967. The first verse of his poem is as follows (Ref. 1, p 167):

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(which was rather late for me)—
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles' first LP.*

Returning to the main theme of the editorial, it is necessary to go back a decade. Peter Manuel (1927–1958) was born in New York but lived all his life in Britain, and, as a result of a series of murders that he committed in the West of Scotland in 1956 and 1957, he probably has the distinction of being the most infamous criminal of the past century in Scotland. The first victim whom he is known to have murdered was a 17-year-old girl, attacked late at night in January 1956 in a secluded area as she made her way home. Following a chase, Manuel battered her to death when he caught up with her. Some of her underwear was taken away by him. In September 1956, a woman, her daughter, and the woman's sister were all shot. They were found dead in their beds in their home. In December 1957, Manuel murdered an 18-year-old girl as she walked alone in the evening. Some of her clothing had been removed and was found scattered some distance from the body. Also in December 1957, Manuel shot a father, mother, and their 11-year-old son as they lay in bed asleep.

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Manuel was a man with a substantial record of other offending, including two attacks on women. In 1946, he was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment for the rape of a woman, and he had also attacked a woman in 1955. At the end of his final trial, he was convicted of seven of the eight murders and was sentenced to death. While on remand awaiting trial, he initially confessed to the crimes. He later withdrew his confession. After being convicted he claimed responsibility for a further three murders, although prosecution in these cases never proceeded. He was hanged in Barlinnie Prison, Glasgow, in July 1958.² His was one of the last executions in Scotland before the death penalty was finally abolished in 1970. Manuel has often been considered to be the epitome of evil.

At a meeting of the Scottish Medico-Legal Society in Edinburgh in 2002, Lord Sutherland, now a retired High Court Judge, gave an address in which he created again for the audience the issues of the time of Manuel's trial. During 1958, there was horror at such apparently senseless and extreme violence in our midst. Lord Sutherland was uniquely placed to provide this insight as he led the prosecution at Manuel's trial and was able to confirm that, while Manuel was in custody, he was examined by the leading psychiatrists of the day. Forensic psychiatry as a subspecialty did not exist by name at that time. The full confession that Manuel had made was read to the Society by Lord Sutherland during the presentation and gave Manuel's account in his own words of what he had done. In this document and in the psychiatric assessments that were undertaken at the same time, any reference to or clue as to motivation or the thoughts that were associated with the actions was conspicuously absent. Manuel's crimes have never been explained except in moral terms.

About 40 years later, in March 1999, Lord MacLean, also a Senator of the College of Justice, was invited by the government to establish a committee with the following remit:

To consider experience in Scotland and elsewhere and to make proposals for the sentencing disposals for, and the future management and treatment of serious sexual and violent offenders who may present a continuing danger to the public, in particular: to consider whether the current legislative framework matches the present level of knowledge of the subject, provides the courts with an appropriate range of options and affords the general public adequate protection from these offenders; to compare practice, diagnosis and treatment with that elsewhere, to build on current expertise and research to inform the devel-

opment of a medical protocol to respond to the needs of personality disordered offenders; to specify the services required by this group of offenders and the means of delivery; to consider the question of release/discharge into the community and service needs in the community for supervising those offenders [Ref. 3, p 1].

The Committee reported to the Scottish Parliament in June 2000, and the main recommendations were for comprehensive risk assessment of offenders, the establishment of a risk-management authority to oversee this and to maintain standards and consistency, and the creation of a new sentencing option for offenders deemed to be high risk, which was to be termed an order for lifelong restriction, equivalent to a sentence of life imprisonment.

I do not propose in this editorial to discuss any details of the report prepared by Lord MacLean's Committee. Rather, I refer to it here as an example of practice in Scotland and probably many other countries today—that of directing particular attention to sexual offenders and to the need for risk assessment and risk management.

Listening to Lord Sutherland's address in 2002, in which he recreated the climate and opinion of the 1950s, it was tempting to speculate how Manuel and his actions would have been conceptualized by the profession if he were to commit such crimes today. I suggest that rather than taking a moral view and considering him to be ultimately evil, those professionals who were given the task of assessing him and the public who learned about him in the media would, as soon as the facts about him were known, have devoted very much more attention to the sexual aspects of his offending. Furthermore, it is possible that, if this sequence of events were to occur today, there would be criticism directed at the authorities who would be accused of having failed to recognize at an earlier stage the degree of risk that Manuel posed.

The easiest explanation of this shift over 40 years or so would be to postulate that the profession has developed and our knowledge base has expanded. However, any such view may be too simplistic to deal with what has happened and is likely to overlook broader and more fundamental changes in society. Sexuality, risk assessment and management, and a tendency to look for someone in authority to blame when a tragedy occurs are all prominent in everyday life today, certainly in Scotland. The attitude of society toward aspects of sexuality, such as homosexuality or child abuse, is very different now in compar-

ison to 50 years ago, and this inevitably raises the question of the extent to which a change in professional practice has arisen because of changes in society. It would surely not be valid for professionals to consider changes in emphasis as arising solely from science and study within psychiatry. This is obviously a very complex interrelationship, probably best left to sociologists.

In conclusion, I can return to Philip Larkin and speculate about what was in his mind when he wrote his poem. Would a reader be justified in suspecting that Larkin was commenting on what he had identified as being the start of a change within society in relation to attitudes toward sexuality? And since these processes are forever changing, if the case has been made that society influences our professional attitudes and values to a greater extent than is usually acknowledged, then there is a further question to consider. What are the major themes, at present dormant and unrecognized, that would be prominent in

the mind of someone revisiting this dynamic—the relationship between our profession and wider society—in 2050?

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