Seymour Pollack, MD, MA

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Key words: forensics; Seymour Pollack; training

Seymour Pollack, MD, MA, was one of the founding members of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law (AAPL) in 1969, along with other prominent forensic psychiatrists. From 1973 to 1975, Dr. Pollack was its third president. Before the creation of AAPL, he had participated in the Psychiatric Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. He believed that forensic psychiatry was one of the sciences that the legal system needed to consult. He had a unique view of forensic psychiatry and defined it as the application of psychiatry to legal questions, for legal ends and for legal purposes.

In 1937, Dr. Pollack received his BA in zoology and psychology from the University of California at Berkeley. The following year he received a master’s degree in psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). In 1945, he received his medical degree from University of California School of Medicine in San Francisco. He then completed a general internship at the Los Angeles County and University of Southern California General Hospital. He moved to New York and completed a psychiatry residency at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. While in residency, he was in psychoanalytic training at the Columbia University Psychoanalytic Clinic for Training and Research.

From 1951 to 1955, Dr. Pollack returned to Los Angeles, where he was appointed as Chief of Psychosomatic Medicine at the Brentwood Veterans Administration and UCLA Hospital. In 1956, he was hired as an Assistant Professor of Psychiatry in the University of Southern California (USC) Department of Psychiatry. In 1965, while at USC, he created the Institute of Psychiatry and Law for the Judiciary. This later evolved into the USC Institute of Psychiatry,
Law, and Behavioral Science, where he was the first director. He organized teaching programs in psychiatry and law for psychiatrists, district attorneys, public defenders, judges, and lawyers in family law and personal injury cases. In addition to being a professor in the USC Department of Psychiatry, he was also granted professorship in the School of Public Administration and taught courses in psychiatry and the law at the USC Law Center. He considered himself a lifelong student of forensic psychiatry, and he contemplated attending law school to better understand the legal system to improve the consultations by forensic psychiatrists. During his teaching career, he published many articles, chapters, and teaching symposiums. Some of his articles were not published because he believed they could be improved.

During his forensic psychiatry career, he regularly performed, or supervised forensic fellows in performing, psychiatric evaluations at the Los Angeles Mental Health Court, one of the busiest courtrooms in the nation for mental health questions. Dr. Pollack was also involved in several high-profile cases, including skyjacking cases. In 1969, he served as a psychiatric consultant to the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office in the case of Sirhan Sirhan, the person accused of assassinating Senator Robert Kennedy right after his democratic primary victory in California.

In the mid-1970s, Dr. Pollack, along with Dr. Jolyn West, then chair of the UCLA Department of Psychiatry, performed a psychiatric evaluation of Patricia Hearst for the Federal Court in San Francisco. At that time, Ms. Hearst, young heiress of the Randolph Hearst Estate, was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army. She was charged with bank robbery. Following her arrest, she stated that her involvement was not truly voluntary, and her attorneys alleged that she was substantially mentally ill as a result of the conditions of her captivity. In 1977, Dr. Pollack contributed his files on the Sirhan and Hearst cases to the H. Wallace Institute of History of Psychiatry at Weil Cornell Medical College.

During his 16-year tenure as Director of the Institute of Psychiatry, Law, and Behavioral Science, he trained more than 100 psychiatrists and psychologists in the forensic psychiatry fellowship. He was an outstanding teacher and mentor, questioning his forensic fellows on their forensic reports and testimony in a manner similar to cross-examination, and in doing so making them aware of the importance of their reasoning.

Dr. Pollack influenced many forensic psychiatrists, forensic psychologists, judges, and lawyers involved in the confluence of mental health and the law. One of his mentees, Dr. Bruce Gross, Director of the USC Institute of Psychiatry, Law, and Behavioral Science for 40 years, remembered Dr. Pollack as very hard-working and “one of the best thinkers that I have ever had the opportunity to work with in my lifetime. He inspired me, stimulated my thinking, and we spent many hours discussing new ideas and groundbreaking concepts.” Dr. Gross remembered when, in the mid-1970s, Dr. Pollack called him late at night to discuss his idea that he wanted to start training legislators and top policy makers about psychiatry and the law. Dr. Pollack wanted to meet him the next morning to further discuss obtaining a grant from the Crime and Delinquency Section of the National Institute of Mental Health. That was the beginning of what was to become the USC Institute of Psychiatry, Law, and Behavioral Science.

Dr. Linda Weinberger, another of Dr. Pollack’s fellows, stated that Pollack left a lasting impression on her by his insistence that forensic reports not only reflect the data, but that the data be clearly and logically linked to the opinion. That link was the reasoning. She recalled that Dr. Pollack’s reports were often lengthy, not with superfluous data but with his reasoning.

He would tell me to think creatively and “out of the box”; to consider all possible hypotheses and then “expose my reasons” for rejecting them. I found it to be intellectually stimulating but could also be exhausting. The fellowship was not a 40-hour week, for us or Dr. Pollack. I knew then and I certainly know now that I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to learn from a brilliant and kind teacher who challenged us to grow. Seymour Pollack shaped my career and gave me the ability to teach future forensic psychiatrists and psychologists to perpetuate the need for and beauty of logic.

Dr. Pollack was planning on retiring from the University of Southern California at the age of 65 and to continue with a small private practice. At age 64, he finally decided to fulfill his lifelong passion for the law and was taking courses at Loyola Law School at night to become a better thinker. Unfortunately, he became sick, and he passed away two weeks after undergoing cardiac surgery.

After his death in 1982, in recognition of his dedication as an educator, AAPL established the Seymour Pollack Award for forensic psychiatrists for “notable achievement in education and teaching of forensic
psychiatry.” Dr. Pollack had laid a solid foundation for the USC Institute of Psychiatry, Law, and Behavioral Science, which, more than 40 years later, continues to be an excellent center to train psychiatrists and psychologists in the subspecialty of forensic psychiatry. Dr. Pollack’s legacy lives on through the teaching and training by his former fellows at the Institute he founded.