

Book Reviews

Alan R. Rosenberg, Editor

THE POWERS OF PSYCHIATRY, By Jonas Robitscher, J.D., M.D.
Houghton Mifflin, Boston. Pp. 557, 1980. \$17.95.

“Judge David Bazelon has attacked psychiatry and the American Psychiatric Association for ‘studiously avoiding the examination of the possible misuse of psychiatry’ and has said that this appears to be ‘a profession that wishes to judge, but not be judged, to examine, but not be examined.’” This book examines, judges, and convicts American psychiatry of a long list of abuses. The increasing power and influence of psychiatric authority are criticized for carrying “the imprimatur of science although it is not always scientific,” and “the weight of medical authority although it is only occasionally medical.” In short, Robitscher deplores the fact that “profound decisions are made for individuals on the basis of a discipline that is not well-understood, has a powerful mystique, and has not been subjected to nearly enough criticism and control.”

The first of the book’s four sections outlines the growth of psychiatric authority. Psychiatrists can make determinations to control people — *e.g.*, commit to hospitals, force treatment, and to excuse people — *e.g.*, criminal insanity, relieve soldiers from dangerous duty. The development of psychoanalytic theory further increased psychiatrists’ powers because they were then able to claim understanding of the patient’s unconscious mind. Robitscher believes that psychiatry has redefined all problems of human life as medical problems, thereby suggesting that the rest of the population, the non-experts, should submit to the authority of psychiatric experts.

The second section focuses on the dilemmas of psychiatric power, such as the need to define mental illness and stigmatization. “Prediction of Future Dangerousness” is an excellent chapter which contains a detailed account of why Dr. Grigson was given the label, “killer shrink” in Texas. His psychiatric predictions permitted 26 persons to be sentenced to death. While Robitscher seeks to eliminate its abuse, he does not advocate dispensing with prediction.

The third section is devoted to how psychiatrists exercise their power. Although “the psychiatrist deludes himself that he is value-free,” decisions about criminality, the role of women, and the political views of world leaders are all value judgments masquerading under the scientific authority of medicine. Personal values determined whether psychiatrists

approved abortions because pregnancy involved a "threat to life" in cases where there was clearly no risk of suicide. Some psychiatrists who opposed the Viet Nam War publicized their willingness to "cooperate with anyone who wanted to evade the draft through a psychiatric basis for exemption." Additional psychiatric abuses are evident in some jails, where 98% of the prisoners are on tranquilizers, and prisons where injections of Prolixin are used punitively.

The limits of psychiatric authority are discussed in the final section. Robitscher, who believes that psychiatrists have become "the most important non-governmental decision-makers in our lives," decries political misuse and potential totalitarian abuse of psychiatry. His fear of ever-increasing psychiatric authority leads to the statement "certainly nothing in the futuristic predictions of novelists is any more bizarre or outlandish than the concept of forcing people, by the threat of imprisonment . . . or commitment, to present themselves at bi-weekly intervals to be injected with long-acting tranquilizers and so to have their thoughts, actions, and sexual appetites quelled."

I highly recommend this book for all psychiatrists. Those interested in forensic psychiatry will particularly enjoy the background and follow-up information on landmark cases in mental health law — e.g., *Baxstrom v. Herold* and *Schuster v. Herold*. The author's experience as a practicing lawyer before he came to psychiatry gives him an excellent perspective for balancing patients' rights and their welfare.

Robitscher speaks to psychiatry like a loving parent chiding a well-intentioned, but sometimes greedy and irresponsible child. Although his tone is occasionally righteous, his criticisms are right on the mark. Psychiatric readers will find themselves rethinking their uses of authority and values in their work. Unlike the criticisms of Szasz which can more easily be dismissed because of his hyperbole, Robitscher's views are clearly reasoned, well-documented and usually presented fairly. Unfortunately, a negative bias colors his presentation of some issues, such as ECT and psychosurgery, which may unnecessarily alarm the non-professional reader. By helping to define the limits of psychiatric authority and increasing the scrutiny of psychiatric decision-making, I believe *The Powers of Psychiatry* will accomplish the author's goals.

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