Are you anti-psychiatry?

James Main

One afternoon after passing finals, I was walking down the high street past the building in which we had taken our exams. I saw a placard positioned outside – ‘alternative careers fair’. On impulse, I took a quick look around to ensure no one medically-inclined was in sight, and dipped inside.

In the limbo after 6 years of lectures, patients and essay crises, only houseman-hood loomed ahead. Perhaps this nudged me inside to glimpse what else might be out there! Of course, nothing that delivered the satisfaction of doctoring but bypassed weekend on-calls – TEFL or charity administration didn’t appeal.

Then I found a rather different stall. The Citizens’ Commission for Human Rights (CCHR) had a plush display with a laptop showing clips from a documentary or charity film. I glanced overzealous prescribing out there. ECT with no muscle relaxant – I explained to my new acquaintance (by now she knew I was a doctor-to-be) that this was an historic practice and things are very different now in the UK though she didn’t seem relieved by this.

Our exchange covered some of the CCHR’s concerns – ‘child-drugging’ (Ritalin for ADHD in America). I agreed there was probably some truth in this but was unconvinced by the Naperville study and the complexity of response to psychopharmacologic drugs. Eur Neuropsychopharmacol 2001; 11: 457–74.

Our parting was not disagreeable, but as I walked away, my heart was racing and I couldn’t wait to get away. I had never felt so resented for making a like-minded ally, ‘And are you anti-psychiatry?’ I paused and considered my response. She was in high heels and I reckoned I could make the stairs a good deal faster than she, if things turned nasty.

The CCHR and its allied Church of Scientology as I later discovered are well known for their hostile attitude towards psychiatry, but my brief encounter highlighted for me the need to work reflectively and be able to justify our practice. I hope acquiring an understanding of other perspectives will go on helping me strengthen that middle ground where mutual understanding can alleviate sometimes irrational hostility and salvage therapeutic relationships.
Are you anti-psychiatry? - extra
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