

HISTORY OF THE CARE OF THE MENTALLY ILL

The Victorian Age, then, saw the transformation of the madhouse into the asylum, then into the mental hospital. The advent of this era coincided with the culmination of a series of dramatic changes in society's response to madness.

① The state assumed a much greater role in the handling of insanity.

1805 The first Parliamentary Select Committee was set up to enquire into conditions of pauper lunatics, culminating in 1808 Asylum Act (each County empowered to build an asylum for the care of the insane).

1815 A further Select Committee investigated scandalous conditions of lunatics when William Norris was discovered, chained by the neck for 10 years in Bethlem.

② The Asylum became almost the sole officially approved response to the problems posed by the mentally disordered.

1845 The 1845 Asylum Act made building of county asylums obligatory - not enough had been built since the first Act which had not been compulsory.

③ Madness was increasingly seen as something which could be authoritatively diagnosed, certified and treated only by a group of legally recognised experts.

1841 The Association of Medical Officers of Asylums and Hospitals for the Insane was founded. In 1865 this became the Medico-psychological Association.

In the last part of the 19th the asylum superintendants' pretensions of resting their practice on a scientific basis were under attack; also doubts were expressed about the wisdom of the asylum solution, along with claims for the superior virtue of treatment in the community.

Legislation affecting the mentally ill in this country has gradually built up between 1700 and 1900. The concept and physical presence of large-scale institutions, which were once thought to be appropriate settings for the cure of mental disorder, have provided much of the framework within which (20 psychiatry is still practised. At the start of the 1700s the insane were not legally recognised, often not formally recognised at all, and there was little help or intervention of any kind. The well off might be attended at home by a general physician or in a better sort of private madhouse. The poorer classes might be admitted to a public hospital such as Bethlem, or to workhouses, or to private madhouses of the worst kind. Treatments ranged from bleeding, purging, vomiting and blistering to mechanical restraints.

The most significant event in the 19 was the birth and growth of County Asylums, those large-scale institutions which were later to be called mental hospitals. By the mid 19, the insane were sharply distinguished from other "problem" sections of society. They found themselves in a specialised, bureaucratically organised and state-supported asylum system, which isolated them physically and symbolically from the rest of society. Their condition was now defined as uniquely and essentially medical - and under the auspices of a new group of professionals, i.e. medical men who had become an increasingly organised and self-conscious specialism within the profession of medicine. They were known to their detractors as mad-doctors, and among themselves as alienists or Medical Superintendants of Asylums for the Insane, later to become psychiatrists.