PINEL

The works of Philippe Pinel constituted a revolution even in the midst of one of the most revolutionary periods of history. Four years after the fall of the Bastile this studious French physician and writer was appointed director of the Bicetre, an institution in Paris where lunatics were housed. The Bicetre at that time could hardly be termed a mental hospital, since the inmates fared more like prisoners than patients. According to an official report made to the Council of Hospitals some years before, the cells in which the patients were chained were only six feet square. The report states:

"Air and light were admitted by the door alone. Food was introduced through a sort of wicket. The only furniture consisted of narrow planks, fastened into the moist walls, and covered with straw." Monotony, filth and brutality were the lot of the unfortunate inmates.

Dr. Pinel was distressed at the cruel treatment of the mentally ill. After taking his medical degree twenty years before, he had continued in scholarly pursuit of the classical sciences. Motivated by the death of a friend, whose disordered mind Pinel was studying and hoping to cure, he became increasingly concerned with the care of the insane. He came to the conclusion that, given humane treatment, many patients formerly considered hopeless might recover. "The mentally ill," wrote Pinel, "are not criminals to be punished. They are sick people who deserve kindness and consideration in their suffering."

Pinel was not the first to harbor this humane view. Johann Weyer in the sixteenth century, and St. Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth, each in his day, pleaded the cause of the belabored lunatic. Indeed, St. Vincent outlined procedures for merciful care of mental patients in the religious institutions of his order throughout France. These, however, were able to care for only a small percentage of those needing it. The majority of asylums for the chronically insane were no better than

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dungeons. Several contemporaries of Pinel wrote feelingly on the need for improving the treatment of the insane, but none were in a position to effect the wide-scale reforms which were needed.

Believing that the fetters they wore could only madden the inmates further, Pinel desired to unchain at once the insane of the Bicetre. This, however, could not be effected in the second year of the Republic without the permission of the Commune. Before this permission was forthcoming, Pinel was appointed director of the Salpetriere, a rambling, domed hospital, where the lunatic cells were below the surface of the ground, seeped with water, and infested with rats. When the grudging permission of the authorities was finally obtained, shackles were removed from patients of both the Bicetre and the Salpetriere. As they came forth from the dark cells, there were some among them who had not seen the sun for forty years. They were permitted to walk in the open air of the hospital yard during the day, and at night when they returned to their cells, they were left unchained. Patients who formerly had taken advantage of every chance to attack their keepers became surprisingly docile, once they realized they were being treated with gentle firmness instead of cruelty. Later, Pinel wrote of this liberation: "No measure was ever followed by greater success."

The success was not achieved by the removal of chains alone. A sweeping reorganization of the entire program was instituted at both hospitals. Pinel provided for the redistribution of patients according to the classification of their illness. He put an end to the promiscuous visits of unauthorized persons, who formerly had been allowed to view the inmates for curiosity and amusement. He prescribed several types of therapy and indicated in what situations each might best be employed. He pointed out the value of sedation during periods of extreme agitation, but denounced the indiscriminate use of drugs to simplify the work of the attendants. In evaluating the uses of hydrotherapy, he described the relative merits of various baths, "cold, hot and surprise." This last had reference to the unexpected cold shower occasionally employed with an intractable patient. It was administered, not to punish, but to arouse a strong emotion, with a view to bringing a disordered mind back to reality.

Most important of all, Pinel maintained that regular work must be a fundamental law of all mental hospitals. He organized workshops where patients were kept busy at "mechanical work, rigorously executed." Purposeful labor proved highly effective in maintaining order among the group, and helped stabilize the thinking processes of individual patients. Pinel felt that one of the most promising prognostic signs was to see a mental patient regain interest and enthusiasm in former vocational pursuits.

Thus reorganized, the mental hospitals served as research laboratories for the clinical study of mental illness. Pinel originated psychiatric case histories. Before the hospitals were reformed, the keeping of records was not feasible. With the segregation of patients into different categories, it became easier to follow the progress of each case and draw definite conclusions about the various types of insanity.

Earlier writers on mental illness had considerably confused the system of classification. Some intermixed facts with philosophical opinion, and others reported the different symptoms as though they were separate disease entities. Pinel greatly simplified the classification of mental illness, making the following distinctions:

Melancholy or exclusive delirium.
Mania without delirium.
Mania with delirium.
Dementia, or abolition of thought.

Idiocy, or obliteration of intellectual and emotional faculties.

In his description of dementia, he included senile psychosis, and under the subject of idiocy, he outlined the principal traits of cretinism. His picture of dementia shows clearly the characteristic withdrawal from reality which was later known as dementia praecox and which today is referred to as schizophrenia. He described the excessive nervous excitement of the manic state and noted the frequency with which it alternates with melancholy. He went into the subject of etiology, citing possible predisposing and precipitating causes of insanity. He left extensive reports on the behavior of patients and recorded the response of many of them to various types of therapy. Being the first to apply to mental illness this clinical method of observation, Pinel laid the foundations for all subsequent research in psychiatry. Without the case history, no progress in the field could have been made. This was his contribution to man's knowledge. But his contribution to humanity was yet greater, for Pinel bequeathed to his fellow man the right to receive merciful and enlightened treatment when it is most needed. Joseph Daquin, an outstanding and venerated physician of the time, recognized the achievement of his younger contemporary by dedicating a book to Pinel. He inscribed it to "a friend of mankind, a man of virtue and enlightenment, an able physician in all departments of the art of healing, particularly in the one which is most thorny."

Suggested Reading

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