Book Review

A Prescription for Psychiatry: Why we need a whole new approach to mental health and well-being

Peter Kinderman


Most current critiques of psychiatry take the position that psychiatry is basically sound and helpful, but has ‘gone too far’ in medicalising normality and in prescribing pills for the normal trials and tribulations of life. But Dr Kinderman’s critique is much more profound and fundamental. In the preamble to the introduction he writes:

‘Our present approach to helping people in acute emotional distress is severely hampered by old-fashioned and incorrect ideas about the nature and origins of mental health problems, and vulnerable people suffer as a result of inappropriate treatment. We must move away from the ‘disease model’, which assumes that emotional distress is merely a symptom of biological illness, and instead embrace a psychological and social approach to mental health and well-being that recognises our essential and shared humanity.’

Throughout the book, Dr Kinderman not only exposes the flaws in the medical model of distress, but also points out in simple, persuasive prose how the various human problems embraced by the term ‘mental health’ can be conceptualised as the eminently understandable reactions to adverse life circumstances. He also points out that ‘…the disease-model approaches don’t actually work very well, and social approaches are both most appropriate and most effective.’

But A Prescription for Psychiatry is much more than a critique of the status quo. Dr Kinderman goes on to describe how mental health services, if they are to be genuinely helpful, should be reconfigured and reorganised. He advocates for multidisciplinary teams, but emphatically rejects the notion that these teams would always be led by psychiatrists: ‘In a psychosocial model of mental health and well-being, there would be no assumption that medical psychiatrists would retain their current authority and status.’ Dr Kinderman also stresses the importance of locating these services within the local authority’s social care system rather than within a medical framework. He also advocates an enhanced role for social workers in a reformed system: ‘There are powerful arguments to suggest that the most appropriate professionals to coordinate such services should be social workers.’

A Prescription for Psychiatry is a remarkable book. It is scholarly without being tedious; comprehensive without being overly lengthy. The criticisms of psychiatry are delivered bluntly and directly, but with ample supporting evidence. And the call for reform is convincing and compelling.

I recommend this book highly to anyone working in the mental health field; to clients, former clients, and their families; to members of the public who have an interest in these matters; and to journalists and reporters who write articles on these topics. It is indeed a cardinal work that provides unique insights into the history of the present situation and a well-developed blueprint for fundamental reform.

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