

A New Old Perspective On Mental Health

At some point during the 18th century we decided that mentally ill people were 'mad.' And by mad we meant a danger to themselves and a danger to others. So we humanised and sanitised their living arrangements. Thus began the stories of Bedlam, institutions, electroshock therapy, padded walls and strappy jackets.

This was the humane way in which we treated the mentally ill that demonstrated the 'progressive' nature of modern medicine.

However earlier than this and specifically during the Renaissance, the mentally ill were seen as simply different or irregular. Allowed to live freely in society and possessing qualities and wisdoms that helped to keep our perception of the world accountable.

Michel Foucault was particularly interested in this and what he saw as the degrading of humanity through modern medicine. Foucault pointed out just how much more tolerant we were as a society before we started sectioning people.

I don't believe in many black and whites, and of course our understanding of biology and medicine has come a long way in potentially helping those with mental health difficulties. However, the pitiful and disgraceful amount of money in the NHS budget allocated to treat mentally ill patients tells us that we simply cannot employ this philosophy any longer.

We have to take a step forward – as has been said many times publicly this last year – in treating mental illness properly, but in doing so we cannot take two steps back by further dehumanising and segregating mentally ill people.

Our philosophy should always start with people as people. Incorporation, tolerance, understanding and integration. Surely in the majority of cases, the best treatment grows from a holistic view of society, recognising that a properly functioning group begins with the sum of all its peoples.

We can all do with some perception challenging in this area, because in the spectrum of mental-health maybe were all a little nuts.