



Book Review:

Reflections of a Psychiatrist

by Shailja Chaturvedi, Xlibris 2021

More than other medical disciplines, psychiatrists have a creative side that can be expressed in writing (not referring to academic works). This can come out in novels (occasionally, such as Irving Yalom), autobiographies (mostly a mixed bag) and books for the general reader. There is a fine line to follow. The public is always interested in psychiatry, but ever ready to misinterpret or criticise information that is not to its taste or does not meet the prevailing populist prejudices.

Dr Shailja Chaturvedi, the author of *Reflections on Psychiatry*, has devoted her career to patients in Western Sydney, a region of widely varying incomes, employment, education and ethnic backgrounds. In short, exactly the kind of area where psychiatrists are most needed, rather than clustering in comfortable inner suburbs. Her dedication is of the highest, her practice impeccable and this is reflected in the cases described in her book.

Reflections on Psychiatry is for general readers but contains much for the profession. It is a book not only for and about patients, but psychiatrists, looking at issues like research, journals, ethics and spirituality.

Reflections describes psychiatric disorders with comments on treatment and presentation supplemented by case vignettes. In addition useful sections are added, such as violence in schizophrenia, NDIS, refugee settlement, euthanasia and climate change. There is good insight on resilience and domestic violence, issues always relevant to psychiatric practice.

To this writer's relief, the author does not wedge her case descriptions into the tight-fitting corset of the egregious DSM (as so prevalent now psychiatric textbooks), but follows a clinically sensible and user-friendly pattern. As some past efforts show, this is harder to do than it seems, but this author reaches her goal in an admirable fashion.

That appallingly neglected area of history of psychiatry is not ignored – something more prestigious textbooks could take heed of.

The discussion of post-traumatic stress is sensible, focussing on soldiers and front-line workers rather than the vast extension of the disorder to matters like workplace disputes, resulting in a world-wide pseudo-epidemic and huge channelling of resources away from genuine cases.

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Two issues raised in the book should be of special interest to psychiatric readers. Dr Chaturverdi is scathingly honest in her chilling account of the new world of medical regulation by complaints units run by bureaucrats and, as often becomes evident, non-medical people with a vested antagonism towards doctors. The two cases she describes are far from exceptional and she rightly points out how vexatious complaints are given the benefit of the doubt with far lower standards of proof than are required in criminal courts. Another suspicion is that some doctors who sit on tribunals have a pharisaical sanctimony that ignores any consideration of collegial support. The casualties of the medical witch hunt are not insubstantial and there have been a few suicides. The role of our official body in supporting those who have fallen in this way is not encouraging. If we don't look after our own, then who else is there to do that?

The author provides a case study of the tragic murder of a colleague by a patient, echoing the 2006 murder of Wayne Fenton, an authority on schizophrenia, punched to death by a 19-year-old schizophrenic patient in his rooms, and the murder of Dr Margaret Tobin, not by a patient but a deregistered psychiatrist. Murder of health care personnel is a growing problem and one likely to increase in future. To add to this is the growing phenomenon of illness terrorism. Groups who reject medical explanations and treatment for their conditions (real or otherwise) often make death threats to doctors. Two notable offenders are the anti-vaxxers and the chronic fatigue lobby. Leading researchers have withdrawn from the field because of the sheer vehemence of the threats they have been subjected to. It can only be a question of time before another tragedy occurs.

The vagaries of publishers being what they are, this is a user-friendly book with a clear and readable print with no typos – no mean achievement in this era of computer-formatted printing and rather indifferent editing.

Reflections on Psychiatry is a fine book written with wisdom, insight, empathy and compassion. It is recommended for the public, trainees and mental health workers. It should be in every hospital library and there is much for practicing psychiatrists to learn.