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978-0-521-35371-7 - Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine

Jack D. Pressman

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During the 1940s and 1950s, tens of thousands of Americans underwent some form of psychosurgery; that is, their brains were operated upon for the putative purpose of treating mental illness. From today's perspective, such medical practices appear foolhardy at best, perhaps even barbaric; most commentators thus have seen in the story of lobotomy an important warning about the kinds of hazards that society will face whenever incompetent or malicious physicians are allowed to overstep the boundaries of valid medical science. *Last Resort* challenges the previously accepted psychosurgery story and raises new questions about what we should consider to be its important lessons.

Through an extensive study of patient records, professional correspondence, and the day's medical literature, Jack D. Pressman establishes that lobotomy occurred, not at the periphery of medical practice, but at its center – a finding that engenders a different set of historical problems. To account for why so many reasonable and trusted physicians might have supported psychosurgery's validity, the book reconstructs the particular challenges facing the psychiatrists of the time and the kinds of disciplinary tools that were available to them. The new lesson that emerges from the psychosurgery story, then, is that our usual models of understanding how medicine progresses are deeply flawed. The success of a research venture in medicine is never a safe bet, and the evaluation of therapeutic success is not an absolute measure, being relative to time and place. The standard of what constitutes valid medical science is itself never fixed, but evolving.

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Last Resort

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO



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Gentle, clever your surgeon's hands
God marks for you many golden bands
They cut so sure they serve so well
They save our souls from Eternal Hell
An artist's hands, a musician's too
Give us beauty of color and tune so true
But yours are far the most beautiful to me
They saved my mind and set my spirit free.

– Written by Lobotomy Patient #68,
ca. 1942 (from the archives of
James W. Watts III, M.D.)

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Any historical endeavor that is based upon extensive use of archival records, such as this one, depends upon the dedication of the archivists who make it possible to find the necessary materials. I thus want to express my deep appreciation of the efforts made on my behalf by the staff

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My most heartfelt thanks of all, of course, go to my family, Wendy, Abe, and Zoe, who put up with a heck of a lot.

This journey really began even longer ago, when as an undergraduate major in biology I was unable to reconcile my unhappiness with the privations of laboratory work with my growing fondness for dusty books. A single course with Will Provine – whose infectious enthusiasm for the scholarly life and commitment to teaching are legendary – pointed the way to an alternative career: through the study of history, a fondness for both science and culture could be connected. It is thus to Will Provine that I dedicate this work.

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An Appreciation

Gerald N. Grob

The publication of a first book – particularly one that makes a major contribution – is generally an occasion marked by joy and satisfaction. The years of preparation are more than compensated by the appearance of a book incorporating arduous labor and sustained thought.

In this case, however, the author did not live to see his creation. A few days after sending the copyedited manuscript to Cambridge University Press, Jack Pressman died suddenly on the morning of June 23, 1997. For the world of scholarship the loss was self-evident. For his wife and two young children, his parents and sister, the event was a personal tragedy for which words are inadequate to describe.

I first became acquainted with Jack more than a decade ago. He had just completed his dissertation on the origins of psychosurgery under Professor Charles E. Rosenberg at the University of Pennsylvania, and had accepted a National Institute of Mental Health postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute for Health at Rutgers University, with which I am affiliated. When I read his dissertation, I was astonished at its originality and penetrating insights into the origins and deployment of a therapy long since consigned to the dustbin of medicine.

Shortly after his arrival at Rutgers our relationship underwent a sharp metamorphosis. We went beyond the role of mentor and student, and quickly developed a close and trusting friendship marked by collegiality and mutual respect. He was one of those rare persons who combined scholarly originality with a warm and engaging personality and a subtle yet delightful sense of humor. I can recall our many conversations that, no matter how time-consuming, ended all too quickly. Although I had been working on the history of American psychiatry for more than twenty-five years, I found myself learning from my younger friend who had taken a familiar subject and analyzed it in an entirely novel and persuasive way.

After a year and a half at Rutgers, Jack accepted a position in the history of medicine at the University of California in San Francisco, one of the nation's premier medical institutions. Separated by distance, we nevertheless remained close. I urged Jack to revise his dissertation and submit it for

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publication; I did not see the necessity for major changes. Wisely, Jack pursued his own strategy: He did a great deal of additional research and eventually produced a book that bore only a schematic resemblance to what had been an outstanding dissertation. In retrospect his decision to defer rapid publication was correct. Historians of medicine and psychiatry are the beneficiaries of his determination not to be caught up in the race to publish prematurely.

When Jack first began his research, psychosurgery for severe mental disorders had achieved an odious reputation as a cruel and barbaric intervention. Yet if such was the case, why had it achieved some measure of approval and accolades in the 1940s? Were those who had been recruited into psychiatry and neurology uncaring and ignorant persons who thoughtlessly adopted a radical invasive procedure and remained oblivious to its consequences? Indeed, the criticisms of psychosurgery that became so pervasive during and after the 1960s often hinted that those who sanctioned and performed various types of lobotomies actually were either evil or ignorant individuals masquerading as physicians. The characters so graphically portrayed in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are perhaps symbolic of the simplistic perception of psychosurgery that has prevailed in the popular mind.

To Jack's everlasting credit, he did not follow the prevailing conventional wisdom that was so contemptuous and dismissive of psychosurgery. Instead of writing a jeremiad, he began with several deceptively simple questions that in truth required complex and sophisticated responses. What were the medical and scientific origins of psychosurgery? Why did key individuals in neurology and psychiatry become involved with this therapy? What standards were employed to measure therapeutic efficacy? How could individuals with a psychodynamic perspective endorse an extreme somatic therapy? In brief, he addressed questions that had implications not merely for psychiatry and neurology, but for virtually all of medicine.

Too often the history of medical therapies has been written in terms of progress. Scholars and physicians alike have been prone to overlook the obvious fact that the overwhelming majority of medical therapeutics (even in the recent past) have proven less than efficacious. What makes *Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine* such an important and enlightening work is its author's refusal to portray the history of psychiatry and medicine in stark terms that pits good against evil, enlightenment against ignorance, and science against charlatanism. Medical science, however impressive its achievements, exists within a larger social system and is thus susceptible to the same contingencies that shape all human activities. In this respect *Last Resort*, in illuminating the rise and

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fall of psychosurgery, offers a sobering lesson to those who herald every new therapy as a fundamental breakthrough; it renders firm moral judgments about the history of therapeutics more problematic. Above all, *Last Resort* should be an antidote to the perennial human tendency to view medicine in purely technical terms or to fall into the Faustian fallacy of defining its goal as the final conquest of disease.

I cannot close before expressing my own sadness at Jack's untimely passing. I think of the books that he might have written, of the students he might have taught, and of the contributions that he might have made to the wider world of scholarship. Recalling how Jack's eyes would light up when recounting to me the latest news of his family, I think of the loss that his wife, Wendy, and his young children, Abe and Zoe, have sustained. Yet I hope that those who were closest to him can find meaning and a measure of consolation in a life that was all too brief, but one that left a rich personal and scholarly legacy.