

Bulletin comment: Openness, transparency and candour[†]

Health professionals are well known for being the worst patients. They refuse to seek help for difficulties that, if addressed earlier, might not have resulted in catastrophic complications for themselves and those around them including friends, family and indeed patients. With particularly high rates of psychiatric illness in those working in mental health, it is vital the reasons why those affected delay getting treatment are identified and eliminated.

Research exploring stigmatising beliefs and attitudes among colleagues in mental health services may help. In addition, the general public's understanding of psychological issues will not change unless everyone – especially mental health professionals – has the courage to stand up and be counted when they are affected in the same way. Policy makers, agenda setters and strategy shapers should be aware of high levels of psychiatric illness among practitioners and any research confirming such facts ought to be used as a burning torch highlighting ways to combat it.

Personal difficulty, with or without diagnosable episodes of mental illness, is part of the human experience and needs to be acknowledged by all, but particularly by mental health professionals and organisations involved in the care of patients. Recognition of one's own shortcomings paradoxically might lead to greater respect from both patients and society in general.

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Psychiatric Bulletin (2014), **38**, 180. doi: 10.1192/pb.bp.114.048546

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Profile: Stigma and the psychiatrist – Julia Bland talks to Dinesh Bhugra

Julia Bland

Professor Dinesh Bhugra made bold attempts to move psychiatry forward when President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. In May 2012, **Julia Bland** went to pick his brains as he prepares to take up the post as head of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA).

It is a sign of how things have changed when an Indian-born, openly gay man is elected to lead a profession which up until relatively recently classified homosexuality as a disease. But it is apparent that the newly appointed president of the World Psychiatric Association will have his work cut out. In Uganda a recent law has introduced draconian punishments for homosexuality. In India the president of the Indian Psychiatric Society threw her hands up in horror and said, 'We don't talk about that here!' It is a good job then that Professor Bhugra's achievements and experience are immense and having practised psychiatry for more than 30 years, it would be fair to say he is probably the best person for the post.

He adopts a progressive agenda, having published and spoken out for beleaguered patients, overseas doctors, women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people for many years. The 61-year-old describes himself as an 'optimist', laughing apologetically, as if the concept of optimism somehow excuses the gap between noble aspiration and reality. 'We have to take a stand' is his rallying cry to the profession. 'If we don't, we are sleepwalking over a cliff', he added. He believes unity of voice is crucial. 'If we are seen as divided as a profession, policy makers will take the opportunity to divide and rule', he said. He dislikes the old dreary and pointless internal squabbles between biological and social psychiatry.

Psychiatrists' mental health

He is exercised about the health and well-being of doctors – and especially psychiatrists. He described an interesting consultation the College sent out to over 7000 consultant psychiatrists in 2010, which he presented at the time. The

[†]See perspective on Dinesh Bhugra, pp. 180–182, this issue.