

BJPpsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry

Editor-in-Chief: Professor Gin Malhi



The impact of reduced routine community mental healthcare on people from minority ethnic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic: qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives
Winsper et al

Towards precision in the diagnostic profiling of patients: leveraging symptom dynamics as a clinical characterisation dimension in the assessment of major depressive disorder
Ebrahimi et al

The role of psychosis and clozapine load in excessive checking in treatment-resistant schizophrenia: longitudinal observational study
Fernandez-Egea et al

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Long et al

BJP_{Psych} The British Journal of Psychiatry

ISSN 0007 - 1250

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British Journal of Psychiatry (ISSN 0007-1250) is published monthly. The six issues starting January 2024 comprise Volume 224, the six issues starting July 2024 comprise Volume 225. Orders from non-members of the College, which must be accompanied by payment, may be sent to any bookseller or subscription agent or direct to the publishers: Cambridge University Press & Assessment, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8EA, UK, email journals@cambridge.org; or in the USA, Canada and Mexico, to Cambridge University Press & Assessment, Journals Fulfillment Department, 1 Liberty Plaza, Floor 20, New York, NY 10006, USA, email subscriptions_newyork@cambridge.org. Japanese prices for institutions are available from Kinokuniya Company Ltd, P.O. Box 55, Chitose, Tokyo 156, Japan.

The annual subscription prices (including delivery by air but excluding VAT) for Volumes 224/225 are as follows:

	INSTITUTIONS	INDIVIDUALS
Print and online	£702/\$1248	£566/\$880
Online only	£473/\$725	£307/\$481

Single issues are £67 (US\$120 in the USA, Canada and Mexico) plus postage. EU subscribers (outside the UK) who are not registered for VAT should add VAT at their country's rate. VAT registered subscribers should provide their VAT registration number. Claims for missing issues should be made immediately on receipt of the subsequent issue.

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British Journal of Psychiatry is hosted on the Cambridge Core service at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry>.

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Founded by J. C. Bucknill in 1853 as the *Asylum Journal* and known as the *Journal of Mental Science* from 1858 to 1963.

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Printed in Great Britain by Henry Ling Limited, The Dorset Press, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1HD.

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The *British Journal of Psychiatry* is published monthly by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (a charity registered in England and Wales (228636) and in Scotland (SC038369)). The Journal publishes original work in all fields of psychiatry. Manuscripts for publication should be submitted online at <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/bjpsych>.

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BJPsych

Contents

A9 Editorial Board

BJPsych Editorials

143 Sensitivity to light in bipolar disorder: implications for research and clinical practice

Amber Roguski, Philipp Ritter and Daniel J. Smith

146 Psychiatry in literature – The Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (26 September 1892 to 31 August 1941): attachment, politics and suicide

George Ikkos

147 Developing psychological treatments for psychosis

Daniel Freeman

149 Psychiatry in film – The Oedipal dynamic of ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice’ (from *Fantasia*, 1940)

Frederick Arthur Jack Simon

Original Articles

150 The impact of reduced routine community mental healthcare on people from minority ethnic groups during the COVID-19 pandemic: qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives

Catherine Winsper, Rahul Bhattacharya, Kamaldeep Bhui, Graeme Currie, Dawn Edge, David Ellard, Donna Franklin, Paramjit Gill, Steve Gilbert, Noreen Khan, Robin Miller, Zahra Motala, Vanessa Pinfold, Harbinder Sandhu, Swaran P. Singh, Scott Weich and Domenico Giacco

157 Towards precision in the diagnostic profiling of patients: leveraging symptom dynamics as a clinical characterisation dimension in the assessment of major depressive disorder

Omid V. Ebrahimi, Denny Borsboom, Ria H. A. Hoekstra, Sacha Epskamp, Edoardo G. Ostinelli, Jojanneke A. Bastiaansen and Andrea Cipriani

164 The role of psychosis and clozapine load in excessive checking in treatment-resistant schizophrenia: longitudinal observational study

Emilio Fernandez-Egea, Shanquan Chen, Estela Sangüesa, Patricia Gassó, Marjan Biria, James Plaistow, Isaac Jarratt-Barnham, Nuria Segarra, Sergi Mas, Maria-Pilar Ribate, Cristina B. García, Naomi A. Fineberg, Yulia Worbe, Rudolf N. Cardinal and Trevor W. Robbins

170 Impaired topology and connectivity of grey matter structural networks in major depressive disorder: evidence from a multi-site neuroimaging data-set

Jing-Yi Long, Kun Qin, Nanfang Pan, Wen-Liang Fan and Yi Li

Letter

179 A psychiatrist on the cusp of independence: Owen Berkeley-Hill on how to nudge social change in India

Sanjeev Jain and Alok Sarin

Commentary

180 The potential unintended consequences of Mental Health Act reforms in England and Wales on people with intellectual disability and/or autism: commentary, McKinnon et al

Iain McKinnon and Patrick Keown

Columns

181 Contents of *BJPsych Advances*

182 Book Reviews

184 Corrigenda

Cover picture

Robert Fergusson. Sculpture by David Annand. Outside the Canongate Kirk on the Royal Mile, Edinburgh.

Robert Fergusson (1750–1774), whom Burns called ‘My elder brother in the muse’ and who was admired by Robert Louis Stevenson, Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir, is Edinburgh’s greatest poet. His death in the City Bedlam at the age of 24 highlighted the lack of provision for the mentally ill in the Scottish capital and led eventually to the building of the Royal Edinburgh Asylum (now Hospital), which opened in 1813.

Fergusson was born on the 5th September 1750 in the Cap-and-Feather Close, a narrow alley off the High street in Edinburgh. A sickly child, he was initially not expected to survive infancy. Subsequently, he attended school in Edinburgh and Dundee, before enrolling at St Andrew’s University at the age of 14. He returned to Edinburgh in 1768 and found work as a copying clerk in the Commissary Office. Fergusson had been writing poetry ever since his student days and his poems now began to appear in *The Weekly Magazine* from 1771 onwards. A volume of his poetry, published in 1773, was warmly received and sold well.

Around October 1773, Fergusson began to complain of feeling melancholy and this persisted for several months. In July 1774 he fell down a staircase, sustaining a head injury which rendered him confused and aggressive. He was visited at his home by Dr Andrew Duncan, who was later to become Professor of the Institutions of Medicine in Edinburgh. He arranged for Fergusson to be transferred to the City Bedlam. His condition continued to fluctuate between confusion and lucidity, before he eventually died on the 7th October 1774. He is buried in the Canongate Kirk graveyard, his tombstone paid for by Robert Burns. Although it is not possible to say definitively what was wrong with Fergusson, it seems likely that he died from the consequences of his head injury. The grim conditions prevailing at the City Bedlam led Dr Duncan and others to campaign for the creation of a purpose-built asylum in the city.

Text by Allan Beveridge

Beveridge A. Edinburgh’s Poet Laureate: Robert Fergusson’s illness reconsidered. *History of Psychiatry* 1990; 1: 309–329.

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