



Chair's Corner

The Origins of Psychiatry Training in Worcester

By Sheldon Benjamin, MD

Interim Chair, Department of Psychiatry

Directory of Neuropsychiatry

Professor of Psychiatry and Neurology

The Origins of Psychiatry Training in Worcester

As my tenure directing the Psychiatry Residency program comes dangerously close to a quarter century, I have been looking into its history. The UMass Psychiatry residency opened in 1977, seven years after the medical school was founded and the department established. That year, the residency program “came down the hill” from Worcester State Hospital, with the WSH residency program officially closing and the remaining residents transferring into the new UMass residency. Our program thus considers itself the continuation of one of the early psychiatry training programs in the country. And it is that program's history that I have been studying. J. Edward Prunier, MD (1920-2005) had been the WSH residency training director from 1967 until its closure in 1976. David Myerson, MD (1919-2018) served as the first training director of the new UMass program from 1977-1984. Paul Barreira MD served from 1984-1995, the year I took over as training director.



J. Edward Prunier, MD
Training Director
1967-1976



David Myerson, MD
Training Director
1977-1984



Paul Barreira, MD
Training Director
1984-1995

Nineteenth century psychiatric training was very different from what we now know as residency training. From its opening in January 1833, Worcester State Hospital was run by a superintendent (a psychiatrist or alienist) and a few other general physicians known as assistant psychiatrists. The assistants appear to have been of two types: those who worked under the supervision of the superintendent for a few years to gain experience in psychiatry before moving out of the hospital to practice; and those who remained in practice at the state hospital, sometimes referred to as senior psychiatrists. To confuse matters, all nineteenth century state hospital physicians were called resident physicians because they literally were in residence, living on the hospital grounds. (When I joined the Westborough State Hospital faculty in 1986 there were still some state hospital physicians who lived on the property.) There does not appear to have been a generally agreed upon definition of an “interne” in that some WSH “internes” were Tufts medical students while others were medical school graduates. It appears that the WSH training program began as one for the training of “internes,” the concept of post-doctoral training in psychiatry for physicians having been inaugurated in Philadelphia in 1881.



Worcester State Hospital as it appeared in 1905

In late 19th century Europe, advances in the understanding of dementia and other brain disorders were being made by neuropathologist-psychiatrists or neuropsychiatrists. Emil Kraepelin, Alois Alzheimer, Franz Nissl, Arnold Pick and other European neuropsychiatrists were becoming internationally known. Neuropathology, it was felt, would be the tool to discover the cause of mental illness. So, state hospitals hired neuropathologists to run their laboratories. It was the proximity to Clark University that enabled WSH to recruit the well-known Swiss neuropathologist, Adolf Meyer, from Kankakee State Hospital in Illinois, to run its labs and oversee autopsies beginning in November 1895, concurrent with a teaching appointment at Clark. Meyer's practice was to make clinical rounds to inform his lab work. Presumably as part of Meyer's recruitment, superintendent Quinby agreed to start a specialized psychiatric training program with Meyer as training director. Meyer offered a course in psychology at Clark and involved the other assistant psychiatrists and consultants as teachers. Meyer saw to it that WSH was equipped with a lab fitted out for photomicroscopy, a dark room, and a comfortable library with core references and journals so that his trainees could study. Some of his famous neuropathology colleagues and successors at the other Massachusetts state hospitals included Solomon Carter Fuller, MD, at Westboro State Hospital; Abraham Myerson, MD, at Taunton State Hospital (Dave Myerson's father!); and Myrtelle Canavan, MD and Elmer Southard, MD at Danvers State Hospital.

The prerequisites for acceptance to Meyers' WSH program were a college and medical degree, a reading knowledge of either French or German, some general medical experience and passage of a competitive examination. Four "internes" were selected from the forty who applied in the summer of 1896. The 1896 annual report described their responsibilities as follows: *...to compile and record an exhaustive history of each case upon entrance; accompanying the assistant on medical rounds; take notes of cases at his dictation; make urinary analyses, bacteriological tests, and examinations of the blood and sputa when indicated, and assist at autopsies and the general work of the laboratory. They should share in the instruction given the assistant physicians, and have time and opportunity afforded them to do special laboratory work.*

Superintendent Quinby, apparently responding to the workforce issues of the day, commented in his annual report that: *Such a plan would no doubt prove of great advantage to the institution, as it would furnish material from which to select physicians already trained for the work.* The WSH program would include a one to two-year internship to prepare for another more senior role as assistant psychiatrist for a few years of additional training or a more permanent role on the medical staff.

After Meyer left WSH for a position in New York in 1902 it appears that the instruction of WSH psychiatrists typically came under the supervision of the assistant psychiatrist who served as Clinical Director. Some of these clinical directors were well known clinical educators and WSH remained a desirable venue for post-graduate psychiatric training, just as does the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital today. In his 1928 presidential address to the American Psychiatric Association, Adolf Meyer called for the formation of a certifying body in psychiatry, helping lead the way toward the establishment of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (ABPN) in 1934. With the establishment of the ABPN, the structure of residency training in American psychiatry became more standardized.

Writing about history requires one to make inferences and I am certain that I have only begun to pull back the curtain on the history of psychiatric training at WSH. Feel free to email me with any additions or corrections. Some of the information in this article was gleaned from annual reports of the State Lunatic Hospital at Worcester (the old name for the Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital). You can find them online at: <https://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/625419>