

The Harmful Politics Surrounding Selling Major Mental Health Programs

Carl V. Rabstejnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

Primum non nocere

~[Hippocratic Oath](#)

First, do no harm is a basic precept of physical medicine and mental health since time immemorial. In spite of this, there are advocates of protocols who persist in defending and “selling” their approach in the face of contradictory findings. Treatments are often introduced with the best of intentions and their negative effects are realized later when broadly applied. Consider, a number of FDA approved prescription medicines were later found to have negative side effects (e.g. [Actos and Avandia](#) for diabetes, was found to cause cancer and heart problems). While corrective action is taken to limit use of harmful drugs, mental health programs have no formal oversight.

This essay is motivated by recent events concerning the many-multi-million dollar Army’s Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) no-bid contract program, introduced with fanfare in the American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) flagship journal, *American Psychologist*, January 2011. CSF was a \$125 million initiative introduced into the U.S. Army in 2009. An article in *USA Today*, April 16, 2015, by George Zoroya, “[Army morale low despite 6-year, \\$287M optimism program](#),” casts doubt on its efficacy and raises the potential of causing harm.

It was extraordinary for the American Psychological Association to use a *special issue* of *American Psychologist* to ballyhoo a particular mental health training paradigm. The 13 articles are topped off twice, once by General George Casey Jr., U.S. Army Chief of Staff; and Professor [Martin Seligman](#), a major promoter of positive psychology.

Shortly after the American Psychologist special issue, in the April 20, 2011, *Counterpunch*, Drs. Roy Eidelson, Marc Pilisuk, and Stephen Soldz, members of the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, wrote (3/24/2011) “[The Dark Side of ‘Comprehensive Soldier Fitness’](#),” challenging the ethical, moral, and magnitude of the rollout of CSF by the Army.

Dubious Methods of Selling & Full Disclosure

The focus herein is less on the ethics and morality issues raised by Eidelson, et al., after the *American Psychologist* came out, and directs concern toward promotional method used. I see value of positive psychology over casting everyone as a dependent needing professional intervention for every setback of living. Also, from what is disclosed, I cover similar material in [Guidebooks](#). The difference is in mandatory treatment, unsupported claims of success, and extraordinary selling using a once respected and credible journal. Later empirical finding of contradictory evidence is not good for a leading journal’s reputation for integrity.

CST is not the first treatment method to use extensive marketing to tout its benefits. Another method that I originally thought would supplement my interest in coping and resilience, was [Critical Incident Stress Debriefing \(CISD\)](#). CISD trained and certified thousands of apostles, many of which wrote laudatory articles in their organization’s house organs; this was particularly prevalent in police, fire, and rescue groups. The founder and his primary accomplice wrote several promotional articles and ravaged critics in journals. They formed their own publishing house and started a “referred” journal and claimed no conflict of interest.

Eidelson et al. point to the ineffectiveness of [DARE](#) (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). Twenty-odd years ago, our local police chief let his “Officer Friendly” plead his case to our Rotary club. DARE was being cut from the budget because of reported ineffectiveness, but indoctrinated police officers and educators “perceived” it to be useful and lobbied for its continuation. When a method is in place for awhile it develops a constituency that advocates for continuance.

I have also written about harmful physical medicine movements, bloodletting and lobotomies, in [Zeitgeist](#). Also, beside CISD, Recovered Memories were covered. The latter got its push with the publication of a [book](#) by Ellen Bass, a poet, and her student Laura Davis, a incest survivor. This movement was supported by activist feminists promoting “forgotten” parental sexual abuse and waned when parents fought back with, a formidable counter force united, the [False Memory Syndrome Foundation \(FMSF\)](#). Until then, [Elizabeth Loftus](#)’ scientific research was attacked, to the point where she needed police protection. Here, a book hit a political cord, even with psychologists; some parents were jailed before a sufficient science prevailed.

The Problem of Aggressive Selling

New mental health products are often the result of good intentions that are enthusiastically and aggressively touted by its founders. Therefore, the professions need to act to bridle premature enthusiasm and to provide unbiased forums to make known counter-claims and evidence. That is why the publication by the American Psychological Association raises concern. There is no mental health equivalent to the FDA, which may be hard to implement, so credible self-control is necessary.

Much of the aggressive selling is not as obvious as the CSF example. Mimicking professional journals and publishing companies perverts the flow of information. A more insidious control is infiltration of editorships and anonymous referees with devotees of a popular method. Professional psychologists need to be wary of fads, movements, & *mature methods*, and must develop unassailable ways to assure that no harm is done.