

The Zeitgeist and the Presentation of Ideas

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In presenting help programs one needs to realize that medical and psychological ideas are not solely considered on their scientific merit. Societal beliefs also affect acceptance of what is being proposed. Each age has its belief system that filters what is received willingly and what is rejected out of hand. The word defining the “spirit of the times” is *Zeitgeist*.

Four physical and mental health movements will be briefly discussed that were embraced by a large part of society. These examples were selected to illustrate a few important points because during their heyday they caused harm. All compromised the medical edict: *primum non nocere* — first, do no harm.

While a protocol prevails there may be laypeople and professionals who question its effectiveness. But, for a while, critics are not acknowledged and advocates for a popular method control public opinion. Eventually, persistence pays off, although it may take many years before a new belief system emerges.

Bloodletting claims the First President

No lesser figure than George Washington was a believer in bloodletting. His friend, Benjamin Rush, was America’s most famous physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The doctor believed that all disease was caused by “vascular tension” and bleeding was the universal cure.

The ex-president fell ill on December 14, 1799, and insisted on being bled. From morning to afternoon he sacrificed 80 ounces of blood. After rallying in the early evening, the general died that night. Ironically, on the same day Dr. Rush won a slander lawsuit against a journalist who editorialized against Rush’s propensity toward bloodletting and accused him of killing patients.

Rush was following a cure tradition that went back to Hippocrates when “scientific” reasoning replaced religious and magical beliefs. While bloodletting was becoming controversial it was not yet rejected by the medical profession. *Healers adhere to what they know.*

Lobotomy of President Kennedy’s Sister

A famous case of prefrontal lobotomy was that performed on John F. Kennedy’s sister, Rosemary, who was a moody 23-year-old. The operation was performed by Walter Freeman and left the young lady incontinent, with babbling speech and an infantile mentality.

Dr. Freeman was exploring more efficient methods of dealing with the thousands of mentally ill patients that were warehoused and suffering. With the best of intentions, he developed his technique using a kitchen ice pick on cadavers. Then, he became an *advocate* and toured the country demonstrating the method from 1946 until he lost his medical license in 1967.

Possible motives are debated but one is instructive for us: By becoming enamored with his procedure he may have lost sight of his patients. Thus, objective oversight and feedback are needed to control promoters.

Having given two brief examples that reflect the mindset of well-intentioned physicians, we next look at methods grounded in political and economic motives.

Recovered Memories Confront a Scholar

A short-lived but extremely volatile movement was started by publication of a book, *The Courage to Heal*, in 1986. During its heyday, many parents were charged with sexual abuse of their children and failure to protect the child from an offending spouse. The movement waned by the mid 1990s because parents formed an organization, The False Memory Syndrome Foundation, to counter the belief system and challenge the science.

Elizabeth Loftus, a renowned academic researcher into memory, found herself in the center of the controversy. When Dr. Loftus received the American Psychological Society’s William James Fellow Award, in 2001, she said: “The research findings for which I am being honored now generated a level of hostility and opposition I could never have foreseen. People wrote threatening letters, warning me that my reputation and even my safety were in jeopardy if I continued along these lines. At some universities, armed guards were provided to accompany me during speeches.”

It is apparent that countering bad science is not easy. Even a credible academic was threatened when her empirical data did not support the *desired* outcome.

Trauma Debriefing and Ongoing Advocacy

Grief and trauma counseling became a big business by the end of the 20th century. After 9/11/2001 it was estimated there were almost twice as many counselors as dentists. *Everyone* was considered prone to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder needing *professional* help.

A prime exponent is Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD), a lucrative practice that was first introduced to the public by Jeff Mitchell, in 1983. Since starting, Dr. Mitchell has established an international association and formed a publishing house to produce a pro-CISD journal and books. Over 30,000 people are trained each year that form a large base of apostles to carry the message. Well positioned “certified” practitioners write puff pieces for their house organs.

Several articles were written and published by competent scholars in this new century that Mitchell audaciously dismisses with: “Every single study author of a negative study did it wrong.” He and his disciples continue to be advocates even though the American Red Cross and others have discontinued its use.

These realities need to be considered when proposing ideas that run counter to entrenched beliefs. Fortunately, this century ushered in acceptance of positive psychology, human competence and resilience.