Book review

Brave New Brain: Conquering Mental Illness in the Era of the Genome

Nancy C Andreasen

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In the 1980s Nancy Andreasen, one of America's leading academic psychiatrists and currently editor of the *American Journal of Psychiatry* wrote a popular book called *The Broken Brain: the Biological Revolution in Psychiatry*. It was written for lay people and intended to help them understand how the brain works and how it becomes broken in mental illness; by doing so she hoped to reduce the stigma associated with mental illnesses by making clear that they were brain diseases and sufferers should be accorded the same compassion and respect as people with other illnesses such as cancer or diabetes. Her current book, although new and different, is in many ways a sequel to her earlier book and is designed to move the story on 20 years and take account of the new technologies and discoveries especially in neuro-imaging, and molecular genetics. She expects them to unravel the causes and lead to new treatments of mental illness in the twenty first century. The title *Brave New Brain* she takes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 'Oh brave new world, that hath such people in it'. It was chosen to convey the sense of enthusiasm and optimism, which, she claims, is currently felt by clinicians and scientists who work with mental illnesses. Oh Brave New World is also the title of the final chapter of her book, in which she not only outlines the potential exciting opportunities ahead in mental health but in direct allusion to Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel, *Brave New World*, describes how without careful handling the technologies of genetic engineering

and mind manipulation could have sinister consequences.

This book is very well written and appropriately pitched for the general educated lay person; it is also an enjoyable read for health professionals and researchers. It is especially good in the chapters describing the mental illnesses themselves where the narrative is described from the patient and carers point of view. She is frank about psychiatry and psychiatrists and she is not averse to highlighting the limitations of current psychiatric care and practice. She also has little time for the pomposity and seriousness that surround the 886 pages of definitions, criteria, glossaries and other materials that make up the 4th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. DSM IV*. Reliability is given priority over scientific validity. New conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder spring up with relative ease with unforeseen consequences such as the current massive over-prescription of the amphetamine methyphenidate (Ritalin) to young children. Her chapters on genomics (mapping the genome) and neuro-imaging (mapping the mind) are solid and sensible, well illustrated and easy to follow, full of interesting facts and anecdotes that show the author's deep involvement in these fields. *Brave New World* portrays an optimistic picture of the future prospects for dealing with mental illness. Her military terminology using sentences such as 'The time when we can realistically declare a war on mental illness, with some hope of eventually achieving a victory, has finally come', is rather overdone and seems strangely inappropriate post September 11th. This book is certain to be well received and widely read.

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