

Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN and ALAN LEE

Understanding Suicidal Behaviour: The Suicidal Process Approach to Research, Treatment and Prevention

Edited by Kees van Heeringen. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. 2001. 322 pp. £55.00 (hb). ISBN 0 471 98803 0

The aim of this book is to present a comprehensive explanation of suicidality. This is postulated as a process that is based on personality vulnerability, related to traits of impulsivity and aggressiveness. These in turn are linked to hyposerotonergic functioning. The stress–diathesis model suggests that in such vulnerable individuals, stress events such as adverse life episodes, depression or other mental illness may lead to suicidal behaviour in which the related neurochemical parameter is the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis.

The first section presents supportive evidence from the fields of psychopharmacology, epidemiology, ethology, neuropsychology and clinical psychiatry. The text is on the whole clearly focused on relevant and well-researched data, although at times the clinical heterogeneity of problems subsumed under the category ‘attempted suicide’ introduces a degree of ambiguity. Nevertheless, the hypothesis is set out in a systematic and detailed way, which should facilitate further research towards eventual replication or refutation of its various components.

The second section sets out the potential practical value of such a hypothesis. First, a penetrating analysis of risk factors spells out starkly their gross limitations as they are currently used in clinical practice. Nevertheless, the relatively new discipline of risk-factor research appears to have made an impressive start in clarifying the nature of risk factors and in paving the way to improving their clinical usefulness. There follow several chapters on social causation, the relevance of action theory, which focuses on the goal-directed nature of the suicidal process, and the role of pharmacological and psychotherapeutic approaches to treatment. Deliberate self-harm is evaluated in detail on

the basis of a recent meta-analysis of the literature.

The hypothesis set out here should surely encourage us to review our approach to the assessment and management of suicide risk, and to widen our perspective on what is a tremendous clinical challenge. Personality traits of impulsivity and aggression, and biased memory, which may encourage a sense of entrapment and hopelessness, all have a claim to be considered carefully, along with routine clinical method. It is surprising, though, to discover that the stress–diathesis hypothesis accords depression and other mental illnesses a peripheral stressor role in the process of suicidality. This seems to run counter to clinical experience of severe and acute suicide risk. However, there will be little dissent from the view expressed here that the bedrock of any effective clinical approach to suicide prevention must depend upon skills in face-to-face assessment, particularly with regard to the individual significance of symptoms and behaviour. On reflection, did not Adolf Meyer say this some time ago?

Gethin Morgan Emeritus Professor of Mental Health, University of Bristol, St Michael's Hill, Bristol BS2 8DZ, UK

Developmental Disorders of the Frontostriatal System: Neuropsychological, Neuropsychiatric and Evolutionary Perspectives

By John L. Bradshaw. Hove: Psychology Press. 2001. 304 pp. £39.95 (hb). ISBN 1 84169 226 3

The 1990s were designated the Decade of the Brain, and this is celebrated by the publication of John Bradshaw's well-researched and scholarly account of the frontostriatal system and the six main disorders resulting from its dysfunction. Over the past 10 years there have been enormous advances in understanding of brain processes through increasingly sophisticated imaging

techniques, and Bradshaw draws extensively on information from functional magnetic resonance studies, integrating it with other biological structural and neurochemical knowledge.

I was pleased to read that he is dissatisfied with a modular approach to neuroscience that emphasises splitting into discrete systems: these are arbitrary artificial constructs designed solely for our convenience of describing biological phenomena. All parts of the brain are dependent on other parts for biological function and none is independent of other bodily systems. Psychiatry and paediatrics are two medical specialities that take a very holistic view of patients and Bradshaw's perspective is welcome.

The frontal region of the brain has undergone the greatest evolutionary change in man and is proportionately far larger than in any other animal. It is now recognised to be the place where memory, reasoning, and emotional and social functions are processed and is described by the author as the ‘seat of our personality which underlies the essence of humanity’. The five parallel frontostriatal circuits and their different but overlapping functions are described in chapter two, and chapter three is a helpful account of the basal ganglia, about which ‘so little is known’. These systems are responsible for the ‘what, how and when’ of voluntary responses and actions.

The next six chapters cover the six main disorders of frontostriatal circuits, presenting a careful description of the clinical, epidemiological, genetic, neurodevelopmental, neuroimaging, neurochemical and therapeutic aspects of each disorder. As a paediatrician, I found the chapters on Tourette syndrome, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism particularly interesting and relevant. However, the accounts of obsessive–compulsive disorder, schizophrenia and depression were very informative, offering insight into the paediatric implications and neurodevelopmental issues involved.

This book will increase the knowledge of most people who deal with patients with these six disorders and should therefore improve their management. I recommend it for the reference shelf and for the personal library of anyone interested in the theoretical basis of emotional problems.

Martin Bellman Consultant Paediatrician, Camden and Islington Community Health Services, Children's Centre, 4 Greenland Road, London NW1 0AS, UK