

I was a consultant psychiatrist in the British National Health Service for over twenty years until the mid-1990s. Since then I have been an academic, a writer and advisor on mental health practice and service provision. I was a member of the Mental Health Act Commission (a government inspectorate) for several years until 1995 where I chaired its National Standing Committee on Race and Culture. I am involved in voluntary organisations (non-governmental organisations) providing mental health services for minority ethnic communities in the UK and also for people in Sri Lanka. I have an interest in matters to do with legal safeguards for users of mental health services in the UK and am involved in lobbying for changes in mental health service provision.

I was born and brought up in Sri Lanka in a middle class family. My father was involved in local politics as a socialist and patriot. He was founder member of the Ceylon Labour Party modelled on the British Labour Party. That was way back in the 1930s in a colonial setting when Sri Lanka was called 'Ceylon'. Ceylon was granted an independent status in 1948, the colonialists handing power over to a local land-owning pro-British elite. Soon after that I came to England to study medicine.

During my student days in Cambridge and London I was interested in religion, social issues and psychology. I recall being influenced by (among others) the Methodist preacher Donald Soper, who preached at Kingsway Hall in Holborn, and the Indian guru Krishnamurthy who gave lectures at Friends House in Euston. I qualified as a medical doctor in 1958 and my interests led me into taking up psychiatry. I worked for a short time as a junior doctor in Fulbourn (Mental) Hospital in Cambridge before going to Sri Lanka to work in the (one and only) mental hospital just outside Colombo at Angoda. After six months there I returned to England and followed a fairly uneventful pathway, working in mental hospitals and attending lectures at the Institute of Psychiatry. After about four years as a Senior Registrar at the London Hospital and Claybury Hospital, Woodford (at that time a leading centre in the therapeutic community movement), I became a consultant psychiatrist in 1969 at Claybury. Later I moved to one of the first psychiatric units in a district general hospital – at Chase Farm Hospital, Enfield (Middlesex). I was there until I retired early from the NHS in 1993.

While working as a junior psychiatrist in East London I developed an interest in the field of cultural diversity and was also influenced by the 'anti-psychiatry' movement of the 1960s and 1970s. With the support and supervision of Professor Desmond Pond (at the London Hospital) I carried out research into depression among Jews in East London, exploring matters like family connections, social issues and the idioms of distress diagnosed within a medical model as 'depression'. I did the field work in the 1960s and wrote it up as a thesis for the MD degree (Cambridge University) which I obtained in 1976. Carrying out the field work involved interviewing Jewish people who had been in East London all their lives. It was then that I came to realise the importance of considering racism – in this instance anti-Semitism – whenever 'culture' is considered or studied. So later I was drawn into exploring the reasons why black and other 'cultural' minorities are so badly served by mental health services in England. Since I was working in Eastern Enfield (where there were people from Bangladesh, West Indies etc. I was able

to observe and try to redress some of the injustices I noticed in the services that they experienced – services that I was involved in, sometimes overseeing and even providing them. I discovered how very difficult it was for one person or small group of people to make any inroads into redressing those injustices. I began to see that systemic problems were involved, the system of psychiatry in particular. I then started thinking about, exploring and finally writing about the issues involved, largely to do with racism.

From 1994 until 1998 I was an academic lecturer in mental health at Tizard Centre at University of Kent. I joined that unit because it was dedicated to inequalities in mental health and learning difficulties. I was closely associated there with Charles Watters and helped him in starting up a special unit with an interest in problems of refugees and asylum seekers. I now hold an honorary post at the European Centre for the Study of Migration and Social Care (MASC) which is part of the Social Sciences Department at University of Kent. Also I hold an honorary professorial appointment in the Department of Applied Social Studies at London Metropolitan University. The range of my interests have gradually widened over the years (as represented in the content of my books and papers). Nowadays, I am asked to lecture and teach on ‘transcultural psychiatry’, spirituality, migration, racism, multicultural issues and more recently mental health services in low income countries.

Although no longer in clinical practice, I get involved in lobbying for justice and fairness in the mental health system in UK, advising people seeking redress for injustice within the mental health system. In particular I maintain an interest in the application of (legal) compulsion and custody (‘sectioning’) on the basis of ‘mental disorder’ being present and / or people being considered ‘dangerous’ because they are deemed to ‘have’ such disorders. Since April 2007, I have been consultant to a program in Sri Lanka which is part of a project involving Peru, Guatemala, Nepal and Sri Lanka concerned with mental health and psychosocial support for people affected by armed conflict or disaster. The program is co-ordinated by McGill University (Montreal) – see under useful links to this website. In 2008 and 2009, I have visited Sri Lanka to participate in training of mental health professionals and I have taken a interest in helping to develop mental health services in the country

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