



A brief history of Mental Health Spiritual Care in Victoria

The contribution of Dr E. Cunningham Dax (1908-2008)

In 2018 The Dax Centre in the Kenneth Myer Building, Parkville, Melbourne showcased an exhibition titled 'Disquiet Minds of Victoria'. The exhibition commemorated 70 years since art created by people with an experience of mental illness was first collected and considered useful in support of a person's mental health and wellbeing. Dr. E Cunningham Dax started the collection and is credited with introducing a range of reforms that helped to transform the Victorian Mental Health system, including the introduction of art therapy as a valid modality of treatment, recovery and healing throughout the health and mental health sectors. Today the art collection has 15,000 pieces, 9,000 of which were created in the former psychiatric hospitals of Victoria prior to deinstitutionalisation in the late 1980's.

In addition to his interest in art, Dr. Dax, an English Psychiatrist played a significant role in the evolution of spiritual care in Victorian mental health settings. He served as the chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority of Victoria from 1952, overseeing the Victorian Government's allocation of a 10,000-pound grant to provide for chaplains, chaplaincy training and the provision of multi-faith chapels in the mental hospitals of the day. He worked specifically with members of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Catholic Churches, highlighting the common ground between the denominations and the role of professionally trained chaplains in psychiatric care. (Kenny, 2003) p.17-37. Sandy Jeffs, former inpatient of Larundel Hospital in northern Melbourne recalls the provision of these services being '*a great initiative which delivered some very caring and compassionate chaplains into a muddled and challenging environment.*' (p.140, 2020) Whilst Dr Dax didn't consider himself religious or spiritual, he recognised the importance of ensuring spiritual care was available for patients and staff. In hindsight, this was an incredibly open and responsive stance for the era. If we consider the contemporary understanding of spirituality that includes amongst other things expression through art, alongside religious activity, then we can recognise and celebrate Cunningham Dax as a true pioneer of holistic person-centred mental healthcare.

The following is a recollection from a spiritual care worker interviewed in 2018 for a thesis investigation. This quote serves to illustrate how the discipline of spiritual care brings another lens and offers a valuable dimension into how we can approach holistic mental health care. The quote is from a spiritual care practitioner reflecting on the work of Roy Bradley, an experienced chaplain who worked fulltime at Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital and eventually the Austin Hospital, where this story relates.

'Roy was a member of the interdisciplinary team in the psych ward and involved in a case conference about this particular patient who had been in their care, and they were talking



about a piece of artwork that this patient had done. It was very, very sombre and bleak. It was a tree, it looked like a dead tree, and they'd all been talking about how difficult it was and Roy Bradley was the one who had picked up on one extreme and very tiny point, there was a green shoot and that changed the whole understanding and picture of what might be happening. So that was a very important encouraging story. How things can change if people are aware of what might be happening in someone's spirit.' (Interview with DS conducted by C Holmes 09/04/18 – research for PhD currently in progress)

References:

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