

Images in Psychiatry



The Boston Psychopathic Hospital, circa 1912

The Massachusetts Mental Health Center

The Massachusetts Mental Health Center, formerly the Boston Psychopathic Hospital, opened its doors on June 24, 1912, after 9 years of relentless effort by L. Vernon Briggs, a psychiatrist in the Mental Department of the Boston Dispensary. Briggs campaigned for an acute treatment center that would be closely tied to Harvard Medical School so that patient care could benefit from research and teaching. Eventually, he convinced the state legislature to appropriate funds to purchase land on Fenwood Road and construct a building that was a "5-minute walk" from Harvard Medical School.

From its inception, the institution was a hybrid of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Harvard. The first director, E.E. Southard, was the state neuropathologist and Bullard Professor of Neuropathology at Harvard. He created an institution that was committed to research, training, and the rapid evaluation and treatment of patients before their illnesses became entrenched. He stressed the importance of the social environment for patients with mental illness and the need for psychological testing. He also emphasized biological research as a part of the hospital's agenda, including his own work on the neuropathology of schizophrenia (1), which was a precursor to today's research in neuroimaging to understand the neuroscience of the brain.

Thus, the early mission of the Boston Psychopathic Hospital was excellence in clinical care, training, and research. And even though the field has changed over the past 85 years (the Boston Psychopathic Hospital itself was renamed the Massachusetts Mental Health Center in 1956), this three-part mission has never wavered. Over time, the graduates of its training programs, influenced by Harry Solomon, Jack Ewalt, Elvin Semrad, Milton Greenblatt, Miles Shore, and many others, have spread throughout the field of psychiatry the institution's name and its commitment to the best of clinical care within a spirited academic environment.

The modern "Mass. Mental," in addition to comprehensive clinical and training programs, has its Commonwealth Research Center,

which is a statewide center for study of the neurobiology and epidemiology of severe mental illness. The Commonwealth Research Center has helped to establish the institution as a center of excellence for both the state Department of Mental Health and the Harvard Department of Psychiatry. The Commonwealth Research Center at Massachusetts Mental Health Center provides a core infrastructure for research, including a 12-bed inpatient unit, dedicated to clinical investigation—a platform on which many individual studies can be built. An overarching theme of many of the studies has been the early detection, treatment, and prevention of severe mental illness.

Much has changed since 1912. The era of hydrotherapy, insulin, and metrazol has given way to psychodynamic approaches, the therapeutic community, partial hospitalization, outpatient treatment, continuing care of the chronically mentally ill, and psychopharmacology. But the mission of Massachusetts Mental Health Center has remained the same. It endures as an institution dedicated to the best of clinical care, training, and research. The Center has a special place in the hearts of those who have trained or worked there and a unique position within the field of psychiatry itself—well beyond the walls of its red brick home that still stands where L. Vernon Briggs convinced the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to build it: on Fenwood Road, a short walk from Harvard Medical School.

REFERENCE

1. Southard EE: Dilatation of cerebral ventricles in various functional psychoses. *J Nerv Ment Dis* 1915; 42:741-743

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