



A woman's place

Helen Boyle: pioneer of early mental health treatment

In 1939, Helen Boyle gave her inaugural address as the first woman President of the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (later the Royal College of Psychiatrists). "Every general hospital is failing in its duty", she said, "if it does not have at least an outpatient department for nervous patients". When she began her career, psychiatric treatment for all but the wealthy was largely confined to public asylums. Boyle's had been one of the first voices raised in favour of early diagnosis and treatment for mental breakdown. In 1905, she opened the Lady Chichester Hospital for Nervous Disorders in Hove, UK, and was its director for 50 years.

Boyle was born in Dublin in 1869. When her father, a banker, was declared bankrupt in 1882, her mother travelled with her five children to France and to Germany, where Boyle attended the Höhere Töchterchule in Bonn. Later, she was accepted to train at the London School of Medicine for Women in the UK. Boyle received the triple qualification offered by three Scottish medical colleges in 1893—the only means of obtaining a licence to practise available to women in the UK—and her MD from Brussels a year later. She took to heart the words of one of her lecturers, the physiologist Sir Walter Morley Fletcher: "No one should join any profession without being determined to contribute something new of value to that profession."

Only fairly low-status positions were typically available to women in medicine at this time. Boyle worked at the Canning Town Mission Hospital and as a fourth medical assistant at the Claybury Asylum in London's East End, where she was shocked by the staff's failure to recognise physical conditions such as dysentery in asylum residents. With dry Irish wit, she later wrote: "I saw mental patients... neglected and maltreated until after days, months or years... they were turned into the finished product—lunatics." Faced with the suffering of London's poor, Boyle also began to "[battle] with the intricate obscurities of the psychological questions in unemployment and malnutrition".

Boyle and her colleague Mabel Jones moved to Hove in 1897 and set up in general practice. They also established a dispensary for women and children in a poor area of nearby Brighton. Concern about mental illness among the patients led Boyle to found the Lady Chichester Hospital, initially for women only. It took "£200 and a lot of faith", she wrote. At the time, Boyle's offer to run it as a clinic associated with the Royal Sussex County Hospital was rebuffed.

The Lady Chichester Hospital offered a restorative regime, including hydrotherapy, massage, and psychotherapy, with provision for women to be treated by women. Boyle encouraged patients' friends and families to visit. During World War 1, the hospital opened its doors to male and female patients. The British Army would not admit women in its

medical corps, but in 1915 Boyle served for 5 months at the Reserve Hospital in Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, as part of a largely female medical unit organised by Mary and James Berry of the Royal Free Hospital. Boyle received the Order of St Sava from the Serbian Government for her contribution.

After the war, she toured North America and met Clifford Beers, an influential patient advocate who founded the National Committee for Mental Hygiene in the USA. Championing the interests of patients when she was back in the UK, Boyle co-founded the National Council for Mental Hygiene, which later became the charity Mind. Boyle's approach was integrated and patient-centred: she wrote that "body, mind and spirit, each link in the chain, must be tackled". As a member of numerous organisations—she also helped to found the Medical Women's Federation—she called for a humane approach to child guidance and youth offending. "Delinquency", she said in 1936, "might be an expression of incipient brain disease, of mental defect and retardation, [or] of reaction to intolerable emotional situations".

Boyle had the satisfaction of seeing the principle of early treatment widely accepted in her lifetime. In 1930, the Royal Sussex County Hospital approached her about collaboration: it opened an outpatient clinic and the Lady Chichester Hospital set aside beds for short inpatient stays. When the Lady Chichester Hospital was taken over by the NHS in 1948, Boyle retired to the cottage near Hove where she had lived with a female companion since 1929. Admired for her vigour and commitment to her patients, Boyle brought to her evolving discipline a compassionate awareness of the stresses of everyday life, especially among women and the poor.

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For more on **A woman's place** see **Comment** *Lancet* 2018; **392**: 370 and **Perspectives** *Lancet* 2020; **395**: 263

Further reading

Milliken E. Boyle, Helen (1869–1957), Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004
Subotsky F, Maunze F. Dr Helen Boyle of Brighton (1869–1957). 2011. http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/about-us/library-archives/archives-document-library/archives-dr-helen-boyle-first-woman-president.pdf?sfvrsn=bd43967f_2 (accessed March 26, 2020)



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