

Failed Experiments *

Damien Wilson, Chaos Group, summer, 2021.

*Experiments at the time that seemed plausible, highly probable of success, and lauded by peers. These "experiments" turned out to be wrong-headed, abject failures, and totally without merit.

Two examples from late 18th and early 19th century Britain:

#1 The disordered "Minutiae of the Brain" reconstructed from a later 18th British pamphlet. In what was probably Bethlem Lunatic Asylum at the far west end of London, a British alienist (*a learned person who treated those termed "aliens", or "strange", not mentally normal; from the French, "alienist"*), posited the following experiment to cure the lunatic.



Hypothesis: The cause of mental disorder was the 'scientific fact' that the grey matter in the brains of those who suffered had 'disordered minutiae' that caused the lunatic to become mad. Beating, chaining, whipping, purgatives, etc., were not effective in themselves to change the lunatic's behavior. What was effective, the pamphlet suggested, was inducing a profound shock to the system. If the shock was sufficient, the lunatic's minutiae would realign themselves and the mad person would be cured.

The hypothesis was submitted to the Royal College of Physicians and allegedly given approved.
The experiment:

A. Workmen would construct a "cocktail glass puddle" at the base of the lunatic asylum itself. This *puddle* from the top would just like a simple water puddle; yet it would be a deeply dug hole to the depth of 8 to 10 feet, filled with water. Its shape would resemble 'a cocktail glass'.



Its width at the top was not defined.

B. From the highest floor of the asylum, several orderlies would shove the lunatic out the window and onto the ledge of the structure; the lunatic would have to balance on the ledge of the structure, fearful of falling. The orderlies would then take a long wooden poll and push the lunatic farther along the ledge to the edge of the structure.



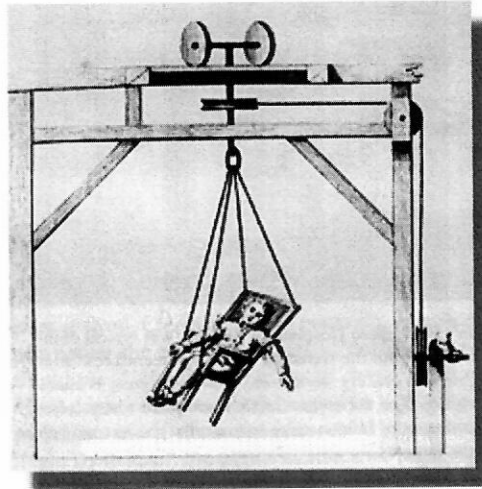
Looking down the patient would only see the ground below, gravel, earth and a water puddle.

C. The pamphlet then stated that the orderlies push the patient off the ledge with the poll, causing the madman to fall from considerable height. Triumphantly, the pamphlet states that "at this precise moment facing certain death" the lunatic's grey-matter, the minutiae would re-align into a normal pattern. The lunatic would hit the puddle and instead of dying would submerge into the deep puddle, re-emerging a sane man!!

A final thought: The pamphlet's final statement, however, does offer this caution: **"IF THE LUNATIC MISSES THE PUDDLE, THE EXPERIMENT IS RUINED"**.

#2. Norris the Maniac and *the unanticipated positive reform of patient care in Britain.*

Hypothesis: The "madman", James Norris was an American mariner who according to John Haslam, MD, was also a ferociously dangerous patient who was at times highly aggressive. The use of "The spinning chair", it was reasoned, would take 'the vinegar out of him'. Thus, this approved method by the Board of Bethlem Asylum, was used repeatedly on "Norris the Maniac". Allegedly, he was subjected to possible years of this 'treatment', yet with little lasting success.



The immediate outcome for this "remedy" was that the patient lost control of all bodily functions and was spun into unconsciousness. In the 1790's, this "experiment" for most was seen to be a limited success since impulsive aggressiveness was temporarily abated. But, Haslam had to admit that this "experiment" failed since it didn't alter Norris' behavior once he became conscious.

Haslam had free reign in caring for inmates. Frustrated with the limitations of The Spinning Chair, Haslam then designed a special mechanical restraint to keep Norris literally confined to a 12" space, totally denying him movement. *He was held in this position (allegedly with approval) between somewhere between 9 to 14 years.* (See Norris' image below).



John Haslam, MD



Major reform in British Asylums: 1815 – and beyond:

The House of Commons had heard of abuse in British “Madhouses” for years. They reeked of mayhem and scandal; the drive to investigate them occurred only in 1815 after Wellington’s final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo allowed the House of Commons to focus more fully on domestic concerns.

A select committee of the House of Commons led by the Quaker MP Edward Wakefield forced its way into Bethlem Asylum and made the country shudder with its reports of what they saw there. Wakefield ordered the mechanical restraint of Norris removed and found “a shriveled and dying man”. Norris died the following year. The public was horrified. Haslam refused to cooperate, accepted no blame, and was subsequently fired (in 1816) from his post. The consequences of this investigation resulted in major, positive changes to British asylums:

- A National Commission developed *standards of patient care* approved by the Crown.
- “Moral Therapy”, an approach stressing engagement with the patient, and not restraint and threat became chief features of inpatient care as written into standards of practice.
- Rebuilding asylums from the ground up and large increases in funding and staff spurred practice models; one of most progressive examples was that of **The York Retreat**, a Quaker run asylum in the countryside just south of the city of York, designed to provide care without restraint. The grounds of the asylum were turned into a huge farm with inmates engaged in husbandry, growing food to sustain the community at the Retreat.

A **Codicil:** In 1865 at the close of the American Civil War, Jefferson County, Wisconsin, wanting to design their asylum with the latest ideas, sent three representatives to **The York Retreat** to exam their model of care. They returned to Wisconsin and modeled their institution, opened in 1867, after The York mode of care. As tragic as the American “Norris the Maniac’s” life was, his life had an impact on future patient care in the New World!

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