

A Changing Identity

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There have been such significant developments in medicine over the last 10 years that the impact on the discipline of psychiatry and the care of patients who are mentally and emotionally ill will be felt for years to come. Surprisingly, many of these advances and discoveries have been in other areas of medicine and have already started to impact the mental health field. It is not uncommon for technological advances in one area to stimulate developments in others.

What have been the advances in imaging?

Imaging technology has contributed significantly to advance our understanding of brain function and to provide an early glimpse of the biologic underpinnings of the mind. Functional imaging techniques have allowed a more intimate understanding of the living brain and of thought and emotional processes. These developments, asso-

ciated with molecular biology, have changed the landscape of psychiatry from a psychologically- and psychodynamically-based discipline to a medical specialty.

Furthermore, in addition to promoting a gradual change in the identity of psychiatry towards a more medical profile, these developments are providing pathways to understanding the physiologic underpinnings of the mind. The body and mind can no longer be viewed as distinct entities. Interestingly, these new, cutting-edge approaches have, in a few instances, been supported by biologic research which lends credence to previously formulated psychodynamic concepts. An example is the work of Weinberger on the consequences of early life psychic trauma. This type of trauma has been shown to result in permanent changes in brain function and in behaviour subsequent to the trauma. The results not only add credence to the body-mind relationship, but also open up new avenues of intervention.

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What have we learned about molecular biology?

Research in molecular biology has been underway for a number of years, but the breakthroughs to the brain have surged forward in the last decade. Psychotropic pharmacotherapy has become more receptor-specific, as it has in other disciplines with more accessible target organs than the brain. Unfortunately, the efficacy of these psychotropic pharmacotherapeutic agents has not improved in proportion to the improvements in their safety.

The fallout from the human genome project has influenced psychiatric research and will eventually impact all phases of care of the mentally ill, including prevention. It is not expected that gene therapy will be disease specific for some time. On the other hand, as the conceptualization of mental disorders changes, one could expect evolving gene therapy to address the broader systemic brain functions, such as impulsivity, aggression, and other pathogenic characteristics.


In the future, gene therapy may address brain functions, such as impulsivity and aggression.

with some overlap in other areas. A facetious comment could be that psychiatry is becoming the refined neurology of the mental processes.

It can be realistically expected that the coming research developments will lead to biologically-based diagnoses in psychiatry, as in the rest of medicine. It can also be expected that these new diagnostic categories will be reflective of an underlying physiologic complex.

The short-term benefit for the short-term future is that medical students will come to feel more comfortable in grasping the new approaches to psychiatry, as these approaches become more synonymous to the medical approach. That is, the acceptance of the body-mind-environment relationship is becoming

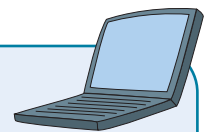
more readily integral to the approach to psychiatric patients. In this context, it will become easier for family physicians

to manage the care of patients with psychiatric disorders by integrating both the psychic and the somatic aspects of an individual. 

What does the future hold?

Psychiatry and neurology will inevitably develop a rapprochement, with psychiatry addressing primarily mental processes, and neurology addressing movement and sensory processes,

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1. Canadian Psychiatric Association: www.cpa-apc.org
2. Health Canada—Mental Health Summary: www.hc-sc.gc.ca