

The Eagleton affair: Stigma of mental disorder

Sen. Thomas F. Eagleton's (D-Mo.) disclosure that he had undergone psychiatric treatment set off a round of political, personal and psychiatric speculation that resulted in his replacement this week as the Democratic Party's Vice-Presidential nominee. A good deal of the conjecture centered around the fact that in the early 1960's Eagleton had received electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) as part of a treatment for depression.

There are many schools of thought on how ECT works and some disagreement about when or even whether the treatment should be used. Some researchers say ECT causes a metabolic shift, some say it frightens the patient into normalcy rather than submit to another treatment, others say ECT affects memory molecules to the degree that it shunts them or actually destroys tissue.

If the latter were so, ECT would be used on a severely depressed patient in an attempt to shut out whatever it is the person is thinking about or recalling that is contributing to the depressed state of mind. Once the connection is broken or disentangled the patient returns to the premorbid state—the state of mind prior to the onset of depression. The ECT suppresses the effect of the disorder. Whatever was present and available to precipitate the disorder, however, may remain. The patient may still be vulnerable to the preexisting conditions and to any possible loss of memory produced by the ECT. However, says Los Angeles clinical psychologist Virginia Johnson, more extensive research



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Eagleton: This was the week that was.

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must be undertaken before such encoding theories can be proved.

Should the fact that a person has such a vulnerability disqualify that person from holding high public office? Or, should that person be judged by the same standards used to judge everyone else? Zigmond Lebensohn, a Washington psychiatrist, believes a person should be judged according to what he is, not what he has been through. Heart, lung, eye and stomach conditions are all subject to recurrence, he says, the same as some cases of depression.

The American Psychiatric Association observes that depression is a common form of mental disorder. Abraham Lincoln suffered from fits of suicidal depression. In a statement issued last week, the APA said ECT is a relatively safe, highly effective (90 percent) treatment that has the advantage of terminating an episode of depression very quickly. "In general," the APA concludes, "the assumption of normal activities by countless thousands of people who have been successfully treated for depression is compelling evidence that the existence of an episode of depression in a person's medical history should be considered in the same manner as a wide range of successfully treated illnesses."

But not everyone sees mental illness as a curable condition. Myths abound, psychiatrists are called kooks and mental illness is something that is feared. The National Association for Mental Health has been attempting for years to erase the myths and to educate the public about mental illness. Irving H. Chase, president of the NAMH, has urged that the public not permit Sen. Eagleton's past history of emotional illness to affect discussions or attitudes as to his future competency. Said Chase, "It is obvious that people are still unaware of what mental illness really is and that those who have been under psychiatric care are still being subjected to the unfounded fears of people around them."

It is probably true, as Lebensohn says, that anyone who was sensible enough to reach out for treatment would probably do so again and ward off further episodes. Thousands of persons have had mental illness and have made good recoveries and gone on to more responsible positions and higher achievements. "It would be an unfortunate reflection on these people," says Lebensohn, "to know that Sen. Eagleton had to step down because of that."

Along the same line Chase said, "Those who are strong enough to recognize and seek help for their emotional problems are to be commended." Unfortunately, after seeing what happened to Eagleton, there may be fewer people seeking help when they need it. □

U.S.—Soviet cooperation to focus on six areas

The United States and the Soviet Union have selected six areas for their heralded joint cooperation in science and technology. Energy is first on the list, including nuclear, thermonuclear, magnetohydrodynamics, solar and geothermal. Others are agriculture, computer applications in management, water resources, microbiology with emphasis on production of protein and other compounds, and chemical catalysis on both basic and applied research levels.

Agreement on the areas was a result of the Moscow conference July 2 to 8 between representatives of both governments (SN: 7/1/72, p. 7). Edward E. David Jr., science adviser to President Nixon, signed the record of the Moscow discussions in Washington July 28 in the presence of Nixon and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin. V. A. Kirillin, deputy chairman of the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers and chairman of the State Committee for Science and Technology signed in Moscow.

The Moscow conference also established the guidelines for a joint commission. The commission will select specific projects for joint cooperation within the six areas. Working groups have been established in both countries and will report to the commission at its first meeting in Washington in late October. Named to the commission for the United States were David, James B. Fisk, president of Bell Telephone Laboratories; Harvey Brooks, dean of the division of engineering and applied physics at Harvard; H. Guyford Stever, director of the National Science Foundation; and Herman Pollack, director of the State Department's Bureau of International and Scientific Technological Affairs.

David mentioned several areas of special interest to the United States: Arctic technology. ("The Soviets have populated and done research on ice islands. We have not done as much as they.") Magnetohydrodynamics generating facilities. ("This technology does not come under the Atomic Energy Commission agreement of 10 years ago with the Soviets.") High powered lasers for thermonuclear reactions and fusion. (David pointed out that the Soviets have generated 1,300 joules in a 16 nanosecond pulse or 600 joules in a two nanosecond pulse. "That is higher power than we are getting.") David also expressed U.S. interest in Soviet work in superhard materials and titanium metallurgy.

David says the Soviets are reportedly interested in U. S. computer technology for management and economic planning. □