

The Professional Life of Dr Eric Cunningham Dax

(Presented at his funeral on 4 February 2008)

I am most honoured to be asked by Dr Dax's family to speak briefly about his professional life. It is difficult to be brief about his remarkable professional career, especially as it extended right up to his ninety fourth year, the year he retired - for the third time (as the Director of the Cunningham Dax Collection). I am grateful for the privilege of working closely with Dr Dax for the past ten years and to hear him share some of his reflections about his professional life.

Dr Eric Cunningham Dax graduated in medicine from St Mary's Hospital, University of London in 1932. His early interest was in medical science. He held a position as a research assistant in the Department of Physiology at University of Cambridge before embarking on his clinical career.

His interest in the mind is notable from the beginning of his clinical career. After his internship, he worked in various hospitals for people with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities.

He joined the Netherne Hospital in 1939 as its Deputy Superintendent and became Superintendent 2 years later. Over the next 10 years he turned Netherne into one of England's most innovative hospitals for the mentally ill. Initially, his main interest was in scientific research and he established one of the first research centres in psychosurgery and neuropsychiatry. After the war, his focus shifted to initiating community treatment and art.

In 1952, Cunningham Dax was invited to be first Chairman of Victoria's newly formed Mental Hygiene Authority. It is impossible to list all the reforms that he introduced whilst in this position, but their legacy is far reaching. I offer today only a very brief overview.

To appreciate the transformation that he brought in his 15 years as the most senior government official in mental health, we need to understand what psychiatric care was like before he started. Psychiatric care took place in large hospitals, referred to Asylums, and the emphasis was on custodial care rather than treatment. Patients were locked up in large, dirty, crowded wards and most slept on worn-out mattresses on the floor.

While Cunningham Dax introduced modern treatments, including the use of antipsychotic and antidepressant medications and general anaesthesia for electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), he was best known for his pioneering work in community treatment.

His other important reforms included dividing the care of people with intellectual disabilities from those who were mentally ill, initiating child psychiatric services, psychogeriatric services, forensic psychiatric services and services for people with alcohol dependency. He was also closely involved in setting up Australia's first telephone counselling service.

Given his high position and his interest in medical science, it would be easy to mistake Eric Cunningham Dax as a conservative, autocratic medical man. However, he had a deep and compassionate appreciation of the human dimension.

He rarely spoke of any of the reforms I have described, although he did speak of his insistence that every patient be entitled to a bed and cupboard of their own. On several occasions, he reminded me that he, personally, designed those cupboards.

I think this simple intervention had a profound impact on the subsequent development of mental health services - it highlighted the importance of respecting each mentally ill person as an individual with dignity and a need for personal space, respect and autonomy.

Eric Cunningham Dax also appreciated that the provision of good mental health care required the contribution of many other health disciplines.

While at Netherne, he established a critical role for social workers. He was among the first to bring in occupational therapy into mental health. Father Roy Bradley, the man credited with bringing modern clinical pastoral care to Australia, told me that Eric Cunningham Dax was personally interested in and supportive of his work, and played a key role promoting pastoral care in mental health.

Eric Cunningham Dax also valued the role of the nurse in mental health care and was instrumental in the development of mental health nursing as a profession. The annual lecture of the college of mental health nurses is called the Eric Cunningham Dax Lecture.

Most importantly, Dr Dax appreciated that mental health care required the support of the general community.

Belinda Robson, who wrote a PhD thesis on Dr Dax, noted that he encouraged the development of voluntary services, and that at one time, there were more than 1500 volunteers throughout the state. The late Edith Pardy, then president of the Mental Hospital Ancillaries said, "He made us all feel special."

By the time he retired in 1968, Victoria was leading the world in its reformation of the asylums and the development of community based treatment. The World Federation for Mental Health recognised Eric Cunningham Dax's work by publishing his book, 'From Asylum to Community,' in 1961, and made him a consultant in psychiatric service development.

Upon retiring from the Victorian public health service, Eric Cunningham Dax was invited by the Tasmanian government to assist in developing community mental health services and other health and welfare services. He established a new psychiatric research centre to focus on social aspects of health. He undertook research into the complex difficulties of multi-problem families.

He retired (for the second time) in 1984, at the age of 76 and returned to Melbourne.

Over the next 18 years, 'in his retirement', he worked two days a week, in a voluntary capacity, sorting the collection of artworks that he had accumulated over 40 years.

Earlier, in 1946, he invited Edward Adamson, an artist, to assist with art programmes at Netherne. That was the first time where art was formally part of mainstream psychiatric treatment. While he was quite aware of the recreational and healing value of art-making, he was more interested in how the art could illustrate some aspects of a person's experience of mental illness.

He published his systematic studies into the role art may play in treatment in his first book, "Experimental Studies in Psychiatric Art", in 1950. He was able to use this pioneering research to convince the British National Health Service to employ artists in hospitals.

The two standard texts on the history of art therapy acknowledge his contribution in founding art therapy as a discipline and profession. Cunningham Dax's first love, however, was not art, but music. He was one of the founding members of the 'Council for Music in Hospitals' in England, a precursor to the Association of Music Therapists.

As the Chairman of the Mental Hygiene Authority, Eric Cunningham Dax was able to insist that art studios be built in the grounds of the hospitals. He brought in artists and musicians to restore humanity to those archaic institutions.

As he developed community treatment, Dr Dax was among the first to appreciate the detrimental effects of stigma. He thought that the stigma of mental illness was a result of fear, a fear that was fed by ignorance.

He was quick to see that the artwork of his patients could offer a most interesting and accessible form of public education about mental health. On this basis, he set out to establish a collection.

This Cunningham Dax Collection, with more than 12,000 works, is now one of the largest of its type in the world.

In the time that I knew him, I never heard him speak of any of his achievements with a sense of pride or triumph. He did not want the collection to be named after him, but those who supported him in establishing it insisted. He did not see the Collection as a personal collection but one that belongs to the people of this country.

Eric Cunningham Dax has left us with a remarkable and lasting legacy of his professional life. It is a legacy which will be felt and appreciated for generations to come.

Dr Eugen Koh
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