# Mental Illness – A Crime In The 19th Century

If the level of tension/stress that we bear in today's times was carried by the people in the 19th century, they were considered lunatic.  With all the research, it seems like the authorities back then really made sure that the environment is calm and peaceful for everyone. Even though it meant they had to “arrest” the people causing a slight hindrance to society. Yes, that’s right - arrest. Well, according to the report, it was worse than going to jail. People captured in the mental asylum were tortured to the extent where instead of helping those people heal, their conditions was getting worse on a faster rate. Especially in Australia where Victoria has officially declared the state with the highest insanity in the world in the 1880s.

Back then, human rights weren’t officially established and hence it was easy for the authorities to misuse their powers. Their treatment included being tied up to a chair to the extent where they couldn't move, their legs and hands were chained, and head padded with a headrest over the eyes and ears. For these people, there was no returning to normal – EVER! It is vital for us to dig in the past with regards to this topic as it can suggest on how things can be approached differently in the present and future.

I interviewed Stephanie Carlos who is a professional psychologist from Brisbane and has special knowledge about this topic who said “There was the mishandling and misuse of powers by the experts which contributed to the abolishment of the good rights.”

As history states, the control of the entire of Australia was in the hands of in the early stages and themselves didn’t have a good start. Before the formation of Australia, Britain was said to be the darkest place on earth for mentally ill people. Their ruthlessness towards the unstable had crossed all limits when they were reported to treat the patients like wild beasts until a depressed patient who was also a religious Christian died due to ill-treatment.

This incident had a tremendous effect on one of a fellow Quakers who vowed to bring powerful change in the lives of other mentally ill people.

He believed that the madness has only struck the person’s brain but the heart is still pure inside.

The Quaker opened his own mental hospital which brought huge change in the madness era by contributing charming results with the patient’s health.

These reforms were soon undertaken by other officials eventually affecting Australia as well. But the good phase soon came to an end.

“When people in Britain gained knowledge of mental asylums being built in Australia, many families put their lunatic relative in the boat with some pounds and sent them to Australia. All the other abandoned people who were poor and homeless roaming on the street causing troubles were locked up in asylums. With time, they built more asylums and when Victoria started becoming this proud and prosperous city, they changed the laws for lunacy which gave the doctors more freedom to determine people as lunatic as per their definition” says Carlos.

Upon asking Carlos about how were people identified as lunatics back then, she said that the doctors and the government had lot of power as there were no human rights declared introduced in the 19th century. They were the hunters of the town who could decide who was lunatic as per their will. They picked up people with intellectual disability, children with any sort of disability, people with dementia, epilepsy, people who had drinking problems, etc.

With that increasing number of people admitted in the hospital, there wasn't sufficient staff to handle the chaos and the mental asylums starting falling apart. Day by day the quality of well-being at these hospitals dropped to worse which caused degradation of humanity.

"It won't be wrong to say that people who were first brought to Australia may have had health issues as in the early stage of country formation, people were brought to a place they can't return from and that must have dragged them towards mental disorder."

From most of the pictures of the 19th-century mental asylums, the walls seem to have carvings with a number of drawings, pictures, marks, scratches which all look very hideous and disturbing. The rooms are seen over crowed where patients are seen doing all kinds of things that reflect their mental conditions. Some are seen sitting quietly at one corner of the room, some are seen playing with random things, some talking to themselves, some crying, some fighting. The look of the hospital is best described as muddled with broken doors and windows.

The harsh treatment received by the mentally disturbed people wasn't a headline anymore. In the 19th and 20th century, the western world started to believe and accepted that the treatment for mentally ill people was similar to torture. This acceptance made it easier for doctors to experiment new ways of harsh treatment on the existing patients. Some of these treatments gave the patients near-death experiences.

In the process of researching new treatment methods, the doctors discovered old narratives dating back to the Roman times of people who recovered from insanity by being nearly drowned.

This theory led to mental patients being locked in cages and suffocate in water till the bubbles stop rising. As soon as the patient showed almost drowning signs, they were pulled back up expecting the patient to have survived the treatment and been reinstated their senses.

Other methods included spinning the patients till they vomited and unloaded their bowels.

A restraining chair was invented which looked slightly like an electric chair. To initiate the treatment, the arms and legs of the patients were tightly roped to the chair, closed stool were placed beneath the chair in case the patients evacuated their bowels during the treatment with a padded headrest that went through the eyes and ears. This situation disabled the patients from feeling any sensations and reduced the blood flow to the brain due to the chairs firm grip.

Coldwater was poured on the head and hot water on the feet. This experiment was expected to draw the "insaneness" away from the patients.

Mentally ill people who weren't yet admitted to the hospital were sometimes being ill-treated by their family members. They were often hidden from the public view as the family members were too ashamed to carry the mentally ill to social events.

The electric shock therapy in its testing days has experimented on the inmates where a part of the patient’s brain was detached. With all these facts, the lives of the patients can certainly be termed – almost dead while alive. They lost all rights to their own existence with no hope of living a normal life again.