

Senility before Alzheimer: Old-age mental health in British medicine, politics and culture. 1845-1910.



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1st year PhD



Challenging the idea that the problem of dementia, and discussions on how to cope with it, are new to the twenty-first century, and that nineteenth century medicine was uninterested in the mental health of the old.

- How was cognitive and behavioural change ('mental change') in old age conceptualized in the C19th?
- How were people experiencing mental change in old age represented?
- How was old age mental change, and those perceived to be suffering from it, responded to?
- How important were mental changes in the 'creation of the elderly subject'?

Section two. Policy and Debate: What to do with the elderly?

POLICY

"I am not certain that an old-age pension for those over sixty-five years of age would not materially reduce the number of senile cases in asylums ; and for this reason I venture to repeat the reference made to it some years ago - that the home circle, and not almshouses, workhouses, or asylums, is the proper place for the old who are suffering from the physical and mental effects of terminal dissolution."
- Robert Jones, 1906

- The 'problem' of the elderly in the asylum
- The welfare of the aged poor (the Pensions Act, 1908)
- Relationship between these discourses
- Place of old-age mental change within these discourses

Section one. Medical and Psychiatric Discourses.

THEORY

"The student...is too apt to assume that all varieties of mental ailments in the aged issue in senile dementia; and that the maniacal excitement which is so frequently observed at this time of life is necessarily the accompaniment or the precursor of senile decay."

- William Bevan Lewis, 1889

- Concepts (of ageing and of old age mental illness)
- Classification
- Mind/body link
- Natural or pathological?

Section three. Sites and Practices of Care: The Asylum, the Workhouse and the Home.

PRACTICE

"Why, I've been sitting here for five years, and I shall sit on here to the end. I'm just waiting, you see. We're all just waiting..."
- Sellers, *In the Day-Room of a London Workhouse* (1902)

- Entrance into/movement between these institutions
- Perceptions of elderly within them
- Experience of life within them
- Concepts of old age mental health evident within them