

World's oldest psychiatric hospital opens new museum

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The world's oldest psychiatric institution, the Bethlem Royal Hospital outside London, this week opened a new museum and art gallery charting the evolution in the treatment of mental disorders.

The original hospital was founded in 1247 in what is now central London and the name spawned the English word "bedlam" meaning chaos and madness.

In the 18th century visitors could pay to gawk at the hospital's patients and, three centuries later, stereotypes about [mental illness](#) still abound.

"The museum is to do with challenging the stigma around [mental health](#) and one of the main ways you can do that is actually get people to walk onto the site and realise that this is not a frightening, threatening and dark place," Victoria Northwood, head of the Archives and Museum, told AFP.

The bleak period in the history of mental treatment is addressed but not dwelled upon in the museum.

Iron and leather shackles used until the mid-19th century to restrain patients are displayed behind a wall of mirrors so they cannot be seen directly.

A padded cell is deconstructed and supplemented with audio of a patient describing what it was like to be locked inside.

Not black and white

The exhibition is full of interactive exhibits, including a video where the visitor is challenged to decide whether to commit a young woman, in denial about the dangers of her anorexia, to hospital against her will.

The decision is surprisingly difficult and it shows the complexity in diagnosing ailments linked to the brain, which we still know comparatively little.

"We are just getting across that this is not a black and white issue. It is not very easy. Human beings aren't very easy," Northwood said.

Art features strongly throughout the space, starting with the imposing 17th century statues "Raving Madness" and "Melancholy Madness" by Caius Gabriel Cibber, which used to stand at the entrance to the Bethlem hospital when it was in central London.

Also included are paintings by current or former patients, like Dan Duggan's haunting charcoal "Cipher" series of a man's elongated face—a testament to the 41-year-old's inner turmoil.

Duggan, who made several suicide attempts and was detained three times under the mental health act including at Bethlem, said art was an instrumental tool in his recovery.

"A lot of the time you spend in hospital, particularly a [psychiatric hospital](#), is very prescribed.

"When you're engaged in a creative process, you're able to be free of all of that for a while and the power is back in your hands to do whatever you want to do," he said.

'A very powerful outlet'

Visual artist and dancer Liz Atkin grew up in an alcoholic household. She developed dermatillomania or Compulsive Skin Picking from the age of eight as a way to manage the stress.

"I could have ended things in a very different way," said Atkin, now aged 38.

Atkin received treatment and works with patients at the anxiety unit of Bethlem, which is now located in spacious grounds about one hour south of London.

She said the new museum and gallery is a unique space to encourage healing.

"Making artwork isn't a complete cure and I personally don't think that I'm cured, but I think it provides a very powerful outlet for some of those things that are hard to talk about."

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