



BETTER COURT THAN CORONERS: MEMOIRS OF A DUTY TO CARE

Barrone Hopper

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This is perhaps one of the most significant memoirs of a mental health nurse to emerge for some time. The biography of the author, who commenced nursing in the 1960s, is a fascinating one, as are the events he observed during his training and work at Graylingwell Psychiatric Hospital in Chichester.

Hopper was born in 1937. His childhood home was bombed during the Blitz, and he spent some years as an evacuee during and after the Second World War. The members of his family were separated and this enforced break-up provided fertile ground for reflection and for insights which he later applied in his conversations with patients and observations of staff. During his national service, Hopper spent 13 months on Christmas Island at a time when nuclear weapons were being tested there, so making him a 'nuclear veteran'. Once demobbed and prior to doing nurse-training, he worked in various jobs, including periods spent at a Fleet Street photographic agency, as a West End dance teacher and in the Press Office of New Scotland Yard. After qualifying as an registered mental nurse, he became a social worker, and for more than 30 years specialised in the care of older adults and people with learning disabilities, working close to where he did his initial training.

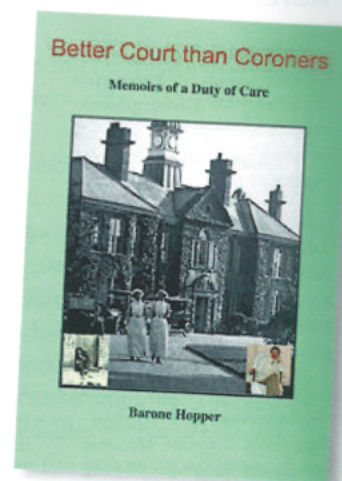
As he states in the 'Preface', for Hopper, this book represents a labour of love which has been gestating for the past 30 years. Readers will be impressed by the enthusiasm with which he approaches his work, the acuteness of his recall, and the ease with which he references the arts, humanities and sciences throughout his book. It is apparent that from his first day as a nurse, his curiosity was active and the committed interest he took in his work is testified to by the meticulous recording of conversations with patients and staff, and of the practices he saw around him. Hopper clearly believed that everyone he met had an interesting story to tell. He draws on both formal records and verbatim accounts of patients, psychiatrists, nurses, pharmacists, administrators and support staff. In describing the context in which mental health services were provided using the language and terminology of the time, Hopper brings to life mental health

care in an age that for most mental health personnel today is regarded as 'history'. The people Hopper talks about come alive as he skilfully knits his accounts of each of them into a coherent tapestry of mental health nursing history.

While the book is highly informative and a fascinating read, there are a few criticisms that might be made by readers versed in historical methodologies. First, the fact that Hopper does not make his methodological approach explicit will, doubtless, cause some to ask why certain events are focused on and not others. I feel the book would have benefitted from more attention to style and presentation, the elimination of repetition, and the correction of some typographical and a few factual errors. These drawbacks may be considered to be countered by the fact that, as the author frequently reminds the reader, this is a personal memoir. Hopper does not claim that the events about which he writes were typical of what was happening in other hospitals at the time. However, through this personal account, he provides fascinating material for those interested in exploring the effects of organisations and legislative frameworks on the culture of care and nursing practice.

I believe that this book is an important contribution to our understanding of the history of mental health care in the UK. It should encourage others to tell their own stories and for anyone interested in learning about or undertaking nursing history, this book would be an ideal place to start. **BJMHN**

Peter Nolan



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