

# guardianedinburgh

## Psychiatry debates and screenings at the Filmhouse

Stephen Fry, Winona Ryder and Nigel Hawthorne star in this weekend's Psychiatry Ethics Film Festival at Edinburgh's Filmhouse - here we have guest bloggers **Jackie and Christopher Bechtel** examining ethical issues linking the films



Stephen Fry's The

Secret Life of the Manic Depressive is showing on Sunday | pic: guardian.co.uk

Each year the festival examines a different topic in the realm of human bioethics. This year's focus is psychiatry ethics with six films being selected for their pertinence to the topic of mental health and accompanying ethical issues.

Following each film, a [panel discussion led by mental health and ethics experts](#), but also by individuals affected by mental health issues, offers the audience an opportunity to participate in the exploration of these challenging issues.

### Changing attitudes

Each year in Edinburgh, several organizations team up to present the public with a film festival intended to inform and challenge conventional ideas about bioethical issues.

This festival aims to foster a sense of community around the many important issues that face us in our rapidly advancing world. Toward this end, the event includes not only films, but also panel discussions following the films from experts in the field. This year's focus on psychiatry promises to be an event as engaging and complex as ever.

The history of psychiatry in the UK is something we should all be aware of, particularly because that history is a work in progress. Further, mental illness is something that affects vast swaths of society today. One of the films highlighted by the festival will be a 2010 BBC4 documentary called 'Mental: A History of the Madhouse'. As the name suggests, this documentary traces the unfolding saga of modern psychiatry in Britain using the mental asylum as its chief focus.

The 20th century, particularly the post-war era was dominated by the use of large, secluded mental institutions for the care of the mentally ill where patients could be quarantined from the rest of society: a society that was not ready to embrace them. Life in these asylums was both empty and repetitive. While many found refuge from a harsh and unsympathetic public in these places, the asylums provided an opportunity for significant abuse against vulnerable people, either through medical experimentation or neglect.

As the 20th century progressed, so did the public's awareness of the insufficiency of the asylum system and it began to be replaced by a more open philosophy which sought to integrate those with mental illness into regular society while offering appropriate support measures.

Today in the UK, there are no more asylums, as such, thanks to the hard work and insight of many pioneers in the field of mental health. But that does not mean that there are no outstanding issues in this ever-burgeoning field. What, for instance, are we to think about the issue of neurosurgery, particularly when that surgery is performed against the will of the patient, though purportedly for their own good?

Or what about the 820,000 people in the UK who currently suffer from a dementia-related illness? What is the role of drugs in treating mental health issues? When should a person not be held responsible for crimes they commit while mentally unstable? These are just some of the questions and quandaries that face both the psychiatric community and policy makers in the UK. The public has an obligation to wrestle with these issues to ensure a safe and secure society for all people, including those with mental disability.



Winona Ryder and Angelina Jolie star in *Girl, Interrupted* - showing on Saturday | pic: PR

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## Age-related dementia

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The festival helps to highlight one of the major issues confronting Scotland: age-related dementia. In the UK, one in three people over the age of 65 will die with a dementia-related disease. It is no exaggeration to characterize the prevalence of dementia as a major health epidemic. It demands our attention if for no other reason than that we or someone we love is likely to face some form of age-related mental illness before death.

The concerns about age-related dementia deepen when we look at the related issue of caring for people with dementia. A [recent study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society](#) found that nearly half of dementia patients in the US were mistreated by their caregivers, either through psychological abuse, physical neglect or physical abuse.

These patients exhibited greater levels of anxiety, isolation, depression and an increased sense of being a burden to their caregiver.

What is society's duty in light of this disturbing observation? How should we be striving to support caregivers, to reduce the regularity of this type of abuse? How can we address the mental health issues of depression and anxiety that so often are the result of a dementia condition?

Another concern is the matter of medication for dementia patients. In the UK, 100,000 elderly patients in nursing homes receive anti-psychotic medication that keeps them subdued. According to sources, more than 23,000 of these patients may be dying on account of the side-effects from these drugs.

Neil Hunt of the [Alzheimer's Society](#) says:

"The over-prescription of anti-psychotic drugs to people with dementia is a serious abuse of human rights. Anti-psychotics should be used as a last resort."

And finally a recent report has suggested that staff of nursing homes may be wise not to administer antibiotics to elderly dementia patients. The fear is that the nursing homes are becoming breeding grounds for antibiotic-resistant superbugs that may infest the rest of society. But should antibiotics for these patients be withheld for the sake of the greater good? Do staff of nursing homes have any obligation to treat elderly dementia patients?

As should be evident, age-related dementia raises a mountain of poignant ethical quandaries. It is vital that Scottish society is aware of these issues and that we have tools for addressing them. The 2010 Film Festival on Psychiatry Ethics aims to aid in both regards by offering challenging films and engaging discussion.

The festival will take place from today until Sunday at the [Filmhouse Cinema on Lothian Road](#). [Click here to see the line-up](#). It is organised in partnership with the local branch of the [British Science Association](#) and the [ESRC Genomics Policy and Research Forum](#).

**Guest blogger Christopher Bechtel, is an ethics committee member of the [Scottish Council on Human Bioethics](#), while Jackie Bechtel is the SCHB media officer.**

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