
Book Review

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Brian Broom. *Somatic Illness and the Patient's Other Story*. London, Free Association Books, 1997. \$48.95.

It was a pleasure to be asked to review this book, published by Free Association Books, London. I congratulate Brian on having found a place to express his clinical experience and ideas in the wider world of Europe and North America. It reduces the sense of isolation and self-absorption which I experience in our current cultural climate, as we struggle to come to terms with the events of our past.

The book is subtitled 'A practical integrative mind/body approach to disease for doctors and therapists'. The focus of seven out of the ten chapter divisions is on the assessment and treatment of patients presenting with a range of somatic symptoms which have failed to respond to traditional treatment regimes. Dr Broom, a consultant physician, a qualified psychotherapist and member of NZAP, begins with the premise that these patients are failed by medical professionals, including psychiatrists, because they are not 'seen' as unique individuals whose disease processes are influenced by disturbances in both mind and body. He is critical of the current diagnostic criteria for Somatisation Disorder, indicating that it narrows the focus to an extent that excludes a wide range of patients whose 'other story' holds the key to their successful treatment.

This 'other story' and its unfolding during the course of treatment, is told throughout the book using case vignettes to illustrate the emergence of clinical issues, the understanding of which Dr Broom shares with the reader as he discusses his thinking about his patients. In this way his method of engaging and working with somatising patients in short term psychotherapy is rigorously and painstakingly described. This is a book which leaves one in no doubt about what to do and how to do it. It is written with the force of personal conviction and, I would guess, some considerable experience of the difficulties met when

trying to convince medical colleagues that an integrative mind/body approach to treatment is necessary.

The practising psychotherapist will generally require less convincing of this need for integration, but as we are reminded, somatising patients are not easy to engage in psychotherapy and their non-psychological mindedness is a struggle to work with. We are apt to concentrate on the mind and to ignore somatic symptoms or regard them as part of the resistance to treatment, thus “skirting around matters of the body” due perhaps to an underlying anxiety about our lack of medical knowledge. In this way we too are apt to fail our somatising clients who are left to “look for answers in the wrong place”.

For this reason I think the book has value for the non-medically trained therapist. It is easily accessible and interesting to read and has been written for a variety of health professionals. Inevitably some of the medical terminology may be mystifying to the non-medical therapist but this did not detract from a deep understanding of the text.

The book is imbued throughout with Dr Broom’s philosophical view of the nature of “personhood”. The final chapters of the book are given over to a philosophical discourse in which he confronts and challenges the commonly held dualist concept of the compartmentalisation of mind and body, biological and psychological. Instead he proposes a revisioning of the core of the problem, advocating a comprehensive “gestalt” in which the meaning of the parts can only be fully understood by an attempt to “see” the whole person i.e. body, mind and spirit. He is supported in his thinking particularly by the writing of A. Shalom whose work is extensively quoted.

The final message is that if we can free ourselves of dualist thinking about the nature of illness and begin to listen to the language of body, mind, and perhaps spirit, the unique story within the multidimensional unity of each patient will emerge. The process may be difficult but the therapeutic results as described are impressive.