Bryan Lask

Innovative psychiatrist whose research led to a greater understanding of the causes of eating disorders in young people

Bryan Lask was a psychiatrist who won international acclaim for his original research into eating disorders in children and adolescents. Lask assessed and treated boys and girls with anorexia nervosa — a condition that affects about one in 150 of the adolescent population — from a family and psychological perspective for about 12 years when, in the mid-1990s, he started working with a leading paediatric radiologist, Isky Gordon, on a series of stories into the functioning of the brain.

The causes of anorexia nervosa, it had previously been assumed, lay entirely in the personalities and upbringing of the sufferer. Inevitably, parents were made to feel guilty. Yet Lask and Gordon discovered that there were changes in the way that blood flowed through the brains of girls with eating disorders.

Building on this, Lask and the Australian child psychiatrist Ken Nun developed a neurobiological theory that focused on the insula, a deep-lying structure in the brain, as central to the development of these conditions.

Their research coincided with a general move in the 1990s to explore psychiatry through the lens of neuroscience and raised considerable interest. Charismatic and gifted at decoding neuroscience for the lay audience, Lask would describe the insula as the ‘Clapham Junction’ of the brain, i.e. the structure connecting all the different brain areas affected by anorexia nervosa. When he appeared on the BBC Radio 4 programme, Inside Health, to speak about eating disorders, the listener feedback was positive that the programme producer proposed setting up a Bryan Lask fan club.

Born in 1941, Lask was the eldest of the three sons of Rita and Aaron Lask, a general practitioner known for his interest in psychosomatic medicine. One of his earliest memories was meeting his father — who had joined the Navy during the war — for the first time aged three. The strange man on the doorstep, he later recalled, was holding an unfamiliar fruit: a banana.

Educated at St Paul’s School, London, where he was a contemporary of Robert Winston, who would become one of the leading experts in fertility, Lask decided to pursue a career in medicine, but twice failed his A level in physics, which was necessary for acceptance at medical school. He would joke that he suffered from a condition that he dubbed CTUP — a Congenital Inability To Understand Physics.

Writing in some desperation to every medical school in England, Lask mentioned that, by the age of 14, he had read all his father’s books on psychosanalysis. (The main reason, he confessed in an article entitled ‘Confessions of a Fraud and Failure’ in the Times, was that they seemed to be full of sex.)

Medical training, however, proved fraught: once he was bowled out of an operating theatre when, after holding open an abdomen with a retractor for six hours, Lask gave in to a ‘completely irresistible urge’ to scratch his nose.

When gripped by tension during the exam season, he would read Winnie the Pooh aloud in the evenings to fellow candidates.

In 1991, for instance, he published the first clinical description of Pervasive Retinal Bryan-Waugh syndrome, in which children refuse to eat, drink, walk or talk for months, sometimes years at a time. One of the cases he described involved a nine-year-old girl, who after developing normally, became increasingly withdrawn, with her behaviour fluctuating: sometimes eating and speaking altogether, emitting only high-pitched moans. Today, pervasive refusal disorder is recognised as a major syndrome, which is sometimes found among refugee children.

Lask’s natural curiosity led him to make such original observations. He was an excellent clinician and interviewer, speaking to children on equal terms and encouraging the free-flow of family discussion during which one member will sometimes disclose information previously unknown to the others.

While in his 30s, and much to his surprise, Lask obtained the post of consultant child psychiatrist at Great Ormond Street Hospital in preference to more experienced colleagues. As she told him of the decision, Audrey Callaghan, the chair of the board and the wife of the future prime minister, James Callaghan, told Lask: ‘We’ve decided to give youth its chance.’

Two conversations at Great Ormond Street then shaped his future. The first was with the clinical psychologist Bryan-Waugh, who suggested that they might study in more depth a group of young children who were suffering from anorexia nervosa. At the time, little had been published on the subject. Bryan-Waugh and Lask set up an exploratory research programme in Europe focusing on early-onset eating disorders.

The second conversation, which was held much later, was with Isky Gordon, a specialist in nuclear medicine who had just obtained the very latest brain imaging technology. Lask told Gordon that studying cerebral blood flow in children with eating disorders was ‘a waste of time’. However, he changed his mind after seeing the preliminary results and confessed that the findings were ‘totally unexpected’.

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Elegant as a speaker and fluent as a writer, Lask was fascinated by words, their meaning and origins. The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Word Histories was his constant companion. Extroverted and warm by nature, he enjoyed gathering with a vast global network of friends and colleagues, preferring somewhere hot, while often tucking into cake — he had a weakness for lemon meringue pie — and telling amusing, often self-deprecating stories.

Few knew that, from 1977 onwards, Lask had been battling complications following treatment for bowel cancer that required frequent admission to hospital. He wrote a paper on the psychological effects of bowel surgery, and until six months before his death, bravely maintained a punishing schedule of teaching and lecturing.

He died after delivering farewell to Judith, from whom he was separated, but not estranged. She cared for him lovingly throughout his illness. He is survived by his wife and their children: Gideon, who is the chair executive officer and founder of multiple technology businesses, and Adam, who is an archaeologist.

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