

The wrong feet

Tony Whitehead

My first job in psychiatry was in a quiet back-water where little had changed since the hospital had opened in the 19th century. As a trainee I had no training but, nevertheless, did have responsibility for a number of long-stay wards.

I still remember one patient, a lady past middle age, who had come originally from Dudley in the West Midlands, but now wanted to go to Australia. Every day she told me that she must go to Australia but could not go because she had the wrong feet.

"I have got the wrong feet, doctor." She would say, "I must have the right feet before I can go to Australia."

The poor lady was diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia as were most of the patients on the ward, but after many years in the hospital it was

difficult to unravel the symptoms and signs of illness from the effects of institutionalisation.

Much later, when I was working in a small general hospital unit, a very different establishment, with no long-stay patients with the wrong feet, I saw Sir Alec Guinness in a television interview. He said that when he tried to get into a character he was playing he first had to get the feet right, meaning his stance, walk, etc.

I remembered my lady from the past and thought, perhaps, she had been correct. She had needed to get the right feet before she could be well and hopefully go to Australia.

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