

New disclosures – on psychologists and

A new report has made claims that the American Psychological Association (APA) worked secretly with government officials during the Bush era to create an ethical justification of the torture programme used on prisoners in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The authors analysed around 600 newly disclosed e-mails that show this occurred after increased media attention on interrogation techniques after the revelation of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.

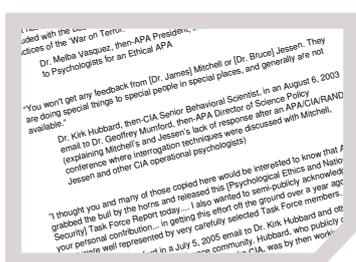
The report (tinyurl.com/plvxwv2), written by six health professionals, including two psychologists, and human rights activists, makes the conclusion: 'The APA secretly coordinated with officials from the CIA, White House, and the Department of Defense to create an APA ethics policy on national security interrogations that comported with thenclassified legal guidance authorizing the CIA torture program.'

Writing in the *New York Times* (tinyurl.com/mqjh6aa) author James Risen said: 'The involvement of health professionals in the Bush-era interrogation program was significant because it enabled the Justice Department to argue

in secret opinions that the program was legal and did not constitute torture, since the interrogations were being monitored by health professionals to make sure they were safe.'

He added that the Bush administration had relied heavily on psychologists, over psychiatrists or other health professionals, in monitoring interrogations. '[This was] at least in part because the psychological association was supportive of the involvement of psychologists in interrogations, a senior Pentagon official explained publicly in 2006,' he said.

Blogger and psychologist Vaughan Bell, writing at www.mindhacks.com, noted the presence of several top psychologists in the e-mails, including Paul Ekman and Martin Seligman. 'To be clear, I am not suggesting that Ekman and Seligman were directly involved in CIA interrogations or torture,' Bell writes. 'Seligman has gone as far as directly denying it on record. But there is something else interesting which links Ekman, Seligman and Mitchell: lucrative multi-million dollar US Government contracts for security programmes based on little evidence that turned out to be next to useless.... Applying psychology to improve airport security screening, soldiers' well-being and interrogation are all reasonable aims. But rather than reviewing the evidence to see what's possible and contracting relevant specialists to develop and evaluate programmes where possible, they seem to have contracted supporters of the "war on terror" for work that



WELLCOME BOOK PRIZE

A tale of a family's journey through terminal illness has won the Wellcome Book Prize. Artist Marion Coutts' memoir, *The Iceberg*, describes the 18 months leading up to the death of her husband, art critic Tom Lubbock, after he was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

Chair of Judges Bill Bryson said in a statement: 'From an extremely strong shortlist of books that blend exquisite writing with scientific rigour and personal experience, *The Iceberg* stood out. Marion Coutts' account of living with her husband's illness and death is wise, moving and beautifully constructed. Reading it, you have the sense of something truly unique being brought into the world – it stays with you a long time after.'

Marion Coutts is an artist and writer and wrote the introduction to Tom Lubbock's memoir *Until Further Notice, I am Alive*, published in 2012. She is a Lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and lives in London with her son. Worth £30,000, the prize celebrates the best new books, fiction and non-fiction, that engage with aspects of medicine, health or illness.

Director of Culture and Society at the Wellcome Trust, Simon Chaplin, said he was delighted that Coutts had taken the prize. He added: '*The Iceberg* shines a burning light on the devastating impact of illness and loss on those who surround and support someone in decline, while simultaneously celebrating the powerful bonds of family and love. It is tremendously difficult to read, but impossible not to become absorbed.'

Bill Bryson was joined on the judging panel by psychologist Professor Uta Frith (University College London), bestselling author Mark Haddon, BBC presenter Razia Iqbal, and barrister and broadcaster Baroness Helena Kennedy QC.

Another book shortlisted for the prize was *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery* by Henry Marsh. See p.466 for his piece giving a neurosurgeon's perspective on the brain and psychology. ER



torture

lacked an applied evidence base. The outcome has been expensive and ineffectual.'

In February, we reported on the allegations made by James Risen in his book *Pay Any Price* that senior APA staff had colluded with psychologists from the CIA. The association initiated an independent investigation into the alleged complicity between the APA and the Bush administration (<https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-28/february-2015/no-torture-without-psychologists>). In a renewed statement (tinyurl.com/mdw6qud) the APA said that 'A third party, independent review of the allegations in today's *New York Times* article and the Soldz et. al. report is being conducted by outside attorney David Hoffman.... Our focus and priority are ensuring the complete independence of Mr. Hoffman's work. For that reason we are not commenting on any allegations about APA support for the CIA torture program at this time.' ER

Address problems early on – HCPC

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) has released a new report, *Preventing Small Problems from Becoming Big Problems in Health and Care* (see tinyurl.com/lyhvqyd), which aims to explore the reasons behind some of the complaints against health and social care workers. Evidence from across health and care regulators, outlined in the report, showed that around half to three quarters of complaints were conduct-related – for example, poor communication – and that these types of complaint are on the rise.

Chair of the Council Anna van der Gaag CBE said there were negative consequences, for complainants and the professionals involved, in bringing such complaints to a regulatory body. She added: 'These include emotional and psychological costs, as the professional may not return to the work for which they have been trained, and the complainant may never feel able to trust the health care system again.'

The first part of the report

is a literature review by Zubin Austin, a Professor of Pharmacy at the University of Toronto, which looks into how competence in health and care has many meanings, as well as many frameworks. These include traditional frameworks based on knowledge, performance, psychometrics, reflection and outcome-based approaches. The author shows how newer, emerging constructs around teamwork, emotional intelligence and engagement may be those which enable health and care to shift closer to a model that is fit for purpose in modern times. It concludes that although checklist approaches may still be necessary, they are not sufficient, as the complexity of health and care increases and patients and service users expect a different relationship with professionals.

The second part of the report, by Christensen-Moore and Walsh at the Picker Institute, is a qualitative mixed-method study. This comprises a retrospective analysis of a sample of fitness



RAMOND FARLEY

The BPS Annual Conference 2015 was held on 5–7 May at the ACC Liverpool, on the banks of the River Mersey.

More than 500 delegates were treated to a packed schedule of top speakers, including keynotes from Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE on mental capital and wellbeing at work, Professor Edgar Jones on air-raids, terrorism and the crowd, Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore on the social brain in adolescence, and Professor Richard Crisp on adapting to diversity. There were parallel supervision, trainee and student conferences, along with a host of Society award lectures. Professor Dorothy Miell delivered her Presidential Address, and handed over to incoming President Professor Jamie Hacker Hughes. Professor Hacker Hughes launched the Society's Member Network Review – see www.bps.org.uk/membernetnetworkreview.

Thomas Elton, BPS Professional Development Centre Manager, said: 'It was fantastic to see the many and diverse areas of psychology come together to share research, practice and ideas. There was a real buzz around the conference, with high delegate expectations met with the content of the programme. There was something for everyone within the themes of the conference, with the different streams, 90 poster presentations, and 248 submissions received.'

Dr Peter Branney (Leeds Beckett University) is Chair of the Society's Standing Conference Committee. He told *The Psychologist*: 'The conference was a celebration of the rich diversity of psychology with speakers from as far Australia and Japan. I particularly liked talking to Reverend Richard Coles, who spoke at the Gala Dinner, and hearing about his struggles with boundaries and confidentiality in his pastoral work. These were issues that were also highlighted in the launch of the teaching ethics competencies.'

Reports from the conference will appear online at <http://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk> and in our July issue. We also produced a special digital edition to mark the conference, compiled from archive pieces by speakers at this year's event: see tinyurl.com/psychconf15

to practise cases, and interviews with users and professionals about the triggers for disengagement in the workplace and the ways these might be mitigated. The study identified links between poor supervisory structures, lack of peer support, professional isolation, workload management problems, and incremental disengagement from practice. The authors concluded that identifying triggers for disengagement early on was possible in the right circumstances, for example where a culture of no blame was encouraged

and where managers were offering support for staff.

Van der Gaag concluded: 'My hope is that this new research will help to generate more activities at the reflective end of the spectrum, and reduce the activities at the regulatory end. Creating opportunities for reflection and honest conversations with trusted colleagues can be a means of addressing problems early on. It is in everyone's interest to prevent harm, to reduce complaints, and to see more emphasis on support, kindness and compassion in health and care.' ER

Neuroscience and criminal justice

A recent report, compiled by the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues, has explored how often American courts currently use neuroscience in trials. *Gray Matters: Topics at the Intersection of Neuroscience, Ethics and Society* (tinyurl.com/k9s8ckd) points out the potential benefits neuroscience could have to the US legal system in the future, while also advising caution.

The Bioethics Commission is a panel of leaders in medicine, science, ethics, religion, law and engineering, advising the US President on issues arising from advances in biomedicine and related areas of science and technology. In its first volume, *Gray Matters: Integrative Approaches for Neuroscience, Ethics, and Society*, published in May 2014, the Commission had

analysed why and how to achieve ethics integration early and explicitly throughout neuroscience research. This was in response to a presidential request from 2013, with Barack Obama writing: 'We should consider the potential implications of the discoveries that we expect will flow from studies of the brain, and some of the questions that may be raised by those findings and their applications – questions, for example, relating to privacy, personal agency, and moral responsibility for one's actions; questions about stigmatization and discrimination based on neurological measures of intelligence or other traits; and questions about the appropriate use of neuroscience in the criminal justice system, among others. It will also be important to

consider these types of questions as they relate to different life stages, from infancy through old age.'

The second *Gray Matters*, pulled together from public meetings and consultation and published in March, states that neuroscience has become an integral part of the criminal justice system in the US. 'In 2012 alone, over 250 judicial opinions – more than double the number in 2007 – cite the use of neuroscience by criminal defendants arguing their brain made them do it. Already, over 5 per cent of murder trials and 25 per cent of death penalty trials feature criminal defendants using neuroscience to argue for lesser responsibility or punishment.'

As well as being used by defendants, neuroscience evidence is used by

prosecutors to predict potential future risk of offending or to assess competency to stand trial, and by defence attorneys as a mitigating factor in a person's sentencing. The case of Peter Jordan Chiesa is outlined: he shot and killed two of his neighbours, and despite evidence of his planning the murders, Chiesa was convicted of the lesser offence of second degree murder after the jury saw brain scans that showed damage to his prefrontal cortex, temporal lobes and cerebellum, which the defence argued would affect his impulse control and temper.

Despite pointing out that the use of neuroscience in the courts is still in its infancy and therefore 'might offer greater utility for guiding policy decisions rather than helping to resolve individual or criminal cases', the report does postulate that it could allow for more accurate and empirical assessments of individuals' intentions, motives, knowledge and mental states. 'Already, defense attorneys have attempted to use neuroscience to try to prove something about individuals' mental states, for example, that they lacked the ability to act with purpose.' The authors conclude that gradual introduction of neuroscientific evidence and concepts, after they are validated, well understood and interpreted accurately, could potentially be highly valuable.

Other topics covered in the report include cognitive enhancement, and capacity and the consent process. It concludes with 'one overarching recommendation that pertains to all funders associated with the BRAIN Initiative' (tinyurl.com/kw8fjks) – that it 'should establish and fund organized, independent, multidisciplinary efforts to support neuroscience and ethics research and education'. **ER**

REF PENALISING JUNIOR RESEARCHERS

A survey into the effects of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) on early-career researchers has shown that many feel that it creates pressure and anxiety that largely impacts on those at the 'bottom rung' of the career ladder. Many also reported a culture of aggression and bullying, at a departmental level, as well as a two-tier hierarchy between teaching and research, which they say is used to inhibit career mobility of those stuck in teaching positions.

Dr Charlotte Mathieson (Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick) carried out the survey and presented her results at Westminster Higher Education Forum's 'Next Steps for the REF' conference. Of the 193 researchers who responded, a majority were within eight years of their PhD submission.

Many of the respondents felt an increased amount of pressure in the job market, with an intense focus on 'REFable' publications. Mathieson also said that those researchers who did not have REFable publications were stuck in casualised contracts that were short-term and teaching-heavy, giving them little time to work towards getting published.

Mathieson said she asked participants an open-ended question about other concerns they may wish to express and found high levels of disillusionment, dissatisfaction at the profession

and cynicism around the REF, as well as comments about the effects on individuals' mental health. 'Insecurity and anxiety were the watchwords of this survey,' she said.

She added, in her presentation: 'In some respects, the REF has become a byword for a wider culture shift in academia – a shift driven by processes that extend beyond the assessment exercise itself – but it is nonetheless a focal point around which early-career researchers see very real, material impacts. If that is so, then perhaps with some work, the REF also has the potential to drive more positive changes in coming years.'

On a more positive note, 68 per cent of those who filled out the survey said they felt that the REF had changed their attitude towards impact, and were thinking more about public engagement from an early stage of their research. Mathieson said that while there have been problems raised with the measurement of impact it was encouraging to see a cognitive shift in this area coming from those starting out on their careers. She added: 'This is encouraging looking ahead to 2020, if the weighting of impact does, as expected, become more significant then ECRs will be well-placed to address this remit.' **ER**

Are you an early-career researcher in psychology with views on the REF? E-mail psychologist@bps.org.uk or tweet @psychmag.

The Psychologist will be making an appearance at a major UK festival this summer. 'The Psychologist and Wellcome Trust presents...' slot at the Latitude Festival pairs psychologist Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore with author Fiona Neill, for a discussion in the Literary Arena titled 'Being Young Never Gets Old – Teenagers Debunked'.



Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (pictured), from the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience at University College London, is an internationally renowned expert on the teenage brain. Fiona Neill is a *Times* columnist whose new novel, *The Good Girl*, is described as 'a compelling portrait of a modern family dealing with a rocky marriage, a troublesome elderly parent and two teenagers exploring their sexuality'. The story focuses on the potentially alarming repercussions of cyberbullying and teen sex in the digital age. Our editor Dr Jon Sutton, who will host the discussion, conducted his PhD in the field of bullying.

The Latitude Festival, which celebrates its 10th birthday this year, draws a crowd of around 40,000 to Henham Park in Suffolk for three days of music, comedy and the arts. Dr Jon Sutton said: 'As a regular punter at Latitude for many years I have watched with interest as the amount of psychology-related content they put on has grown. I made contact to see if they would be interested in a partnership, and I am really thrilled with the idea Tania Harrison and I have come up with.'

'A live event like this is a new venture for *The Psychologist*, so I am nervous but extremely excited at the prospect of reaching out to a large and new audience in an innovative way. Professor Blakemore is consistently fascinating; she knows the author; and I may have some vague input based on my past academic life! So the stars are aligned for an interesting session. And of course, that's just one tiny part of a huge weekend with hundreds of acts across numerous stages.'

The festival takes place 16–19 July – see www.latitudefestival.com for more information and tickets (see also advert on p.437).



Cheltenham Science Festival

The Times Cheltenham Science Festival will include a host of psychologists and neuroscientists talking on topics from risky professions to the existence of free will. The six-day festival will also include events supported by the British Psychological Society.

The three events organised by the Society will begin on 3 June with a journey through the senses with head of the Oxford University cross-modal laboratory, Professor Charles Spence, and molecular gastronomist Jozef Youssef. The pair will show how taste is not just about the tongue but also involves sight, hearing and touch.

Charles Spence will also be presenting alongside Roger Newport (University of Nottingham) on 5 June in a session about illusions. They will demonstrate common illusions and other, more baffling varieties that can affect taste, cause your nose to 'grow' or your arm to disappear.

On 4 June psychologist and historian Peter Lamont will be speaking at another BPS-supported event about thoughts, emotions and desires, which, he will show, are not simply connections in the brain but depend on connections between brains. Using words, videos and music, the audience will experience 'mind control' and discover a new way to feel.

Among the many other fascinating talks and events will be an enlightening event with Rory Sutherland, author of *The Spectator's* Wiki Man column, who will speak about behavioural economics, neuroscience and nudging, as well as ways people can learn from the social sciences.

While one in four people will suffer from mental health disorder during their lifetime the treatment for depression, anxiety and many others is shrouded in mystery – with tales of biased studies funded by drug companies and trials hidden from the public eye. David Adam

will join psychiatrist Guy Goodwin as they discuss the facts behind therapies and drug-based treatments.

Neuroscientist Vince Walsh and behavioural scientist Nick Chater will explore professions where people have to take risks with multi-million pound deals, or with life and death decisions. Along with professional risk takers they will talk about the psychology of convincing yourself to face danger, and decision making under pressure.

Whether or not we have free will is an age-old debate among philosophers, but modern neuroscience has weighed in with its own ideas on the matter. Philosopher Julian Baggini and neuroscientist Patrick Haggard will discuss this from multiple perspectives. **ER**
I Cheltenham Science Festival runs from Tuesday 2 June until Sunday 7 June, and the full Festival programme is available at tinyurl.com/kkrsw87



TEDS turns 20

The Twins Early Development Study (TEDS) based at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN), King's College London, has celebrated 20 years of ground-breaking scientific discovery at an event that explored the genesis of TEDS, its key achievements to date and its future direction.

Thanks to 20,700 UK twins, scientists using cutting-edge research in psychology, psychiatry and genetics have been able to unpick the complex relationship between nature and nurture, transforming the way we think about genetic and environmental influences on diverse areas of behavioural development.

Early collaborators Dr Bonny Oliver and Professor Philip Dale opened the event, describing the birth of TEDS and its humble beginnings, before introducing Thalia Eley, Professor of Developmental Behavioural Genetics and Deputy Director of TEDS, who talked about the science and the stories of TEDS.

Robert Plomin, Professor of Behavioural Genetics and Director of TEDS, acknowledged the study's major impact in 'changing the zeitgeist in terms of nature and nurture, moving the whole discussion closer to a balanced view.' He thanked members of the 'TEDS family' for their contributions to the success of the project, and recognised the crucial backing provided by the Medical Research Council's Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry (SGDP) Centre, the project's home at King's. He acknowledged SGDP directors past and

present, including founder Professor Sir Michael Rutter, Professor Peter McGuffin and current director Professor Francesca Happé, for their support.

We spoke to Professor Eley about the past, present and future of TEDS.

What has been your proudest achievement or defining moment while working on the TEDS project?

My proudest achievement was when Robert asked me to become Deputy Director of TEDS with a view to taking over as Director in 2018. It is such a wonderful project and leaves such a lasting legacy, I was really honoured to be given that role. Another very proud moment was when my first PhD student Dr Alice Gregory, now a Reader at Goldsmiths, completed and was awarded her PhD (in 2004), having used data from the TEDS sample for many of her analyses.

How has the project changed over the years, in terms of its focus or how it's conducted?

The main change has been to shift from asking the parents to tell us about their children, to asking the twins to tell us about themselves as they are now young adults. I used to be told I would know I was old when policemen started looking young. Instead I feel old now that the twins I have worked with since they were toddlers are all young adults building their own independent lives! Another big shift for us has been to move to using the internet for a lot of our assessments. This

really makes it practical and in many ways more fun for the twins themselves.

What are you working on now?

I am working with a PhD student called Laurie Hannigan on some analyses in which we are exploring how the twins and their parents saw their relationship during the teenage years – what they saw the same and what they saw differently. The next step will be to look at how that relates to emotional and behavioural symptoms they also reported during that period.

What's next for TEDS?

We just received our fifth programme grant from the MRC in which we will assess all the twins in their early 20s and also do an in-depth assessment on a subset of them, finding out how they are doing as they navigate the first steps of independent adult life. For me personally, a real excitement is that the TEDS twins are beginning to have children themselves. I have been working for a few years now with a design called 'Children of twins', which allows you to disentangle the relative influence of genes versus the environment on transmission of traits within families down through the generations. Having so much data on the TEDS twins from when they were very young will put us in a unique position when it comes to understanding intergenerational transmission. **JS**

I A video about the study, 'TEDS – The Journey So Far', is available at youtu.be/-LAGbuQnBnQ

Helping science reporters get their facts straight

April saw *The Guardian* host an online discussion about how academics and the media can work more efficiently together to produce better and more accurate reports of scientific findings. Among the panel of contributors were psychologists Pete Etchells (Bath Spa University) and Nadja Reissland (Durham University), as well as science media professionals.

The debate comes in the wake of a *British Medical Journal* paper which found that hype in science reporting comes not only from journalists but also from press releases (see our report at tinyurl.com/l7telhy). The article looked at 462 press releases from 20 leading universities in the UK alongside the original peer-reviewed research papers and resulting news stories.

The authors, led by Professor Petroc Sumner (Cardiff University), used the following outcome measures: whether any of the stories, press releases or papers advised readers to change their behaviour, contained causal statements drawn from correlational research, or inferred to humans from animal research beyond that stated in the associated academic papers. Among the press releases they found 40 per cent contained exaggerated advice, 33 per cent contained exaggerated causal claims and 36 per cent contained exaggerated inference to humans from animal research.

Academics from varied fields also joined the discussion to outline their concerns about dealing with the media; whether press offices and even academics themselves over-hype scientific findings; the benefits of speaking directly to journalists; and whether

universities should bypass contacting the media and allow findings to be disseminated on social media.

One point of discussion was the experience academics had of dealing with journalists. Largely the consensus was that these experiences had been positive, but most of the members of the discussion agreed that they had seen many examples of headline-grabbing science journalism.

Giving a journalist's perspective, user Joe Turner, said there were issues with journalists who are often under large amounts of



...36 per cent contained exaggerated inference to humans from animal research

pressure and have little time to compile articles and cannot approach authors for comment. He added: 'There are few professional science journalists, few outlets to write about much science and low pay. Academics need to know, above all, they can't ask me for editorial control over my work. If you think you can control the way that the media writes about your work, you are wrong.'

The discussion moved on to university press offices and communication teams and the

level of involvement academics have in the publication of press releases about their work. Many agreed that press releases should be made more clear, and Dr Etchells said: 'I would love to see press releases that have a very clear section at the end saying (a) this is what the study does show, (b) this is what the study does not show, and (c) these are the limitations of the study.' There was also agreement that press releases and subsequent news stories about journal articles should include a link to the original paper.

Also speaking about press releases, the Wellcome Trust's head of media, Helen Jamison, said academics and press offices should work closely together to ensure press releases are balanced, newsworthy, but not hyped: 'Whenever a press release goes out with an academic's name on it, it's in their interests for them to also ensure its accuracy – working collaboratively is the only way to achieve this,' she added.

Some contributors suggested that academics may not wish to speak to journalists after press releases were published for fear of their results being hyped or misrepresented. Dr Reissland said on this point: 'Taking the time with journalists is essential, but both journalists and academics' time is limited hence I always prepare for questions which journalists might have before the press release. Also I found it helpful to be able to explain the research in detail to a few selected key journalists who came to visit me or even talk at length on the phone.'

The issue of potential hype stemming from journal articles themselves was also raised by Rebecca Nesbit. Commenter marinajoubert said in response: 'I'm currently reading up about this phenomenon of the "medialisation" of science... There seems to be concern that some scientific studies are chosen and planned – from the start – with a view to attracting media interest. Giving the point of view of pressures within psychology, Etchells said: 'Certainly in psychological research, there is far too much emphasis on "novel", exciting results. Which breeds a culture of researchers feeling the need to jazz up their papers, usually by putting throwaway lines in discussions and abstracts which overhype the results.'

One point, posted by user MikeSimpson, sparked much debate. He suggested that university press offices should, rather than sending press releases to journalists, communicate new research directly to the general public who would then disseminate the content on social media. He added: 'If that's done properly, then people with an interest in the topic will find out from the uni, in a way that is accurate and engaging, rather than through a newspaper or other media source whose primary goal is generating readership.'

Reissland said in response that she disagreed and supported having professionals who could help academics get their message across. She added: 'Social media is as difficult to handle as the printed press. Both need to be accurate.' **ER**

I Read the full discussion in the comments section following the *Guardian* article at tinyurl.com/ob9duwn

The highs and lows of the serotonin theory of depression

A *British Medical Journal* editorial (www.bmj.com/content/350/bmj.h1771) on serotonin and depression, which made the claim that newer SSRI antidepressants are less effective than older tricyclic drugs, has been met with criticism from psychologists and psychiatrists. The article by Professor David Healy, also said SSRIs had led to the marginalisation of cheaper and more effective treatments.

Professor Healy wrote: 'In the 1990s, no academic could sell a message about lowered serotonin. There was no correlation between serotonin reuptake inhibiting potency and antidepressant efficacy. No one knew if SSRIs raised or lowered serotonin levels; they still don't know. There was no evidence that treatment corrected anything.'

According to Healy, the lowered serotonin story 'took root in the public domain rather than in psychopharmacology. This public serotonin was like Freud's notion of libido – vague, amorphous, and incapable of exploration – a piece of biobabble.' Healy suggested this 'myth' has been reinforced across the general public and in the complementary health market, where people are encouraged to eat foods which 'boost' the neurotransmitter.

Many academics commented on the editorial, including Professor Simon Wessely (President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists). He said that while it was unclear how antidepressants helped depression, it was established that such drugs – along with psychological treatments – were helpful in depression. He added: 'Most important of all, the newer drugs (the SSRIs) are safer if taken in overdose than the older tricyclics. People should not change their current medication on the basis of this editorial alone.'

Dr Clare Stanford, Reader in Experimental Psychopharmacology, UCL, said: 'Professor David Healy's article treads a path that is well-worn but out of date. He argues that selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) antidepressants are used because of a pervasive myth that



they boost serotonin levels, but this is something of a straw man. He makes the mistake of assuming that antidepressants reverse a functional abnormality in the brain that causes depression. Actually, the theory that low 'levels' of serotonin in the brain (whatever that means, functionally) causes depression died many years ago, in spite of the fact that a deficit in the synthesis of serotonin in the brain can trigger relapse of depression in some patients who are in remission – a fact which he also fails to mention. By contrast, the monoamine theory of 'anti-depression' is alive and kicking. There is plenty of evidence that SSRIs increase communication from neurones that release serotonin, as well as other monoamine transmitters, and that the ensuing downstream changes, such as creation of new neurones (neurogenesis) or modification of gene expression, can

ameliorate depression. In short, SSRIs probably switch on anti-depression, rather than switch off depression (which could explain the rapid efficacy of ketamine).'

Professor Trevor Robbins (University of Cambridge) told the British Psychological Society that a more objective view of the evidence would be that changes in serotonin function are likely to contribute to many symptoms of, and forms of, depression, but are obviously often not the primary causal factor. He continued: 'SSRIs appear to help some, but not all, depressed people, also their mechanisms of action are not completely understood but almost certainly do so via affecting serotonin function. It is naive to think of levels of serotonin as being the crucial element; the system works in a more complicated way which is gradually becoming better understood.' ER

30 years of parapsychology research

The Koestler Parapsychology Unit, based at the University of Edinburgh, is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. Founder member Caroline Watt first became interested in the psychological reasons behind apparently paranormal phenomena while writing an essay on the topic in her final-year exams at St Andrews University. Dozens of students have undertaken PhDs at the Unit and some have gone on to establish new parapsychology research centres at other universities. Dr Watt said there had been a few ups and downs over the years, including a restructure of the department after the death of the Unit's head, Professor Robert Morris, in 2004 (see her article '20 years at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit' in the July 2006 issue). She added: 'However, the restructuring put us on a much

more secure footing and the continuing staff, me and Dr Peter Lamont, are now fully integrated with the work of the psychology department and the wider University, both of which are beneficial for parapsychology, in my opinion.'

The future of the Unit will remain based in research and teaching in parapsychology, but Watt has plans to increase its public engagement. She said: 'My online parapsychology course is thriving, and I have a book, *Parapsychology: A Beginner's Guide*, in the hopper. And I've co-created a Science of the Paranormal interactive workshop with Professor Richard Wiseman. It's touring science festivals this year, from Brighton to Orkney, and I'm going to be staging it at the 2015 Edinburgh Fringe, I can't wait!' **ER**

Three from ten for UK psychology

Three UK universities have been ranked in the top 10 in the world for psychology. The QS World University Rankings by Subject placed Cambridge second, Oxford fourth and UCL ninth.

The rankings are based on four factors: academic reputation and employer reputation, where academics and employers are asked which institutions they see as excellent either for research or for the recruitment of graduates; and citations per paper and h-index, which measures the productivity and impact of the published work of scientists.

Professor Trevor Robbins (University of Cambridge) questioned whether h-index and citations per paper were actually measuring independent factors. He said: 'Naturally, we are happy to see that we have retained our ranking in this year's QS ratings. We are especially pleased that the newly merged

Department of Psychology now represents the diversity of the subject, for example from social to psychobiological areas. We would be interested to learn more about the precise criteria and the relative weightings of the four main factors that are being used by QS to compute these ratings. Doubtless, different criteria and weightings would lead to different outcomes.'

Five other UK universities also made it into the top 50 in the rankings, among them King's College London – up from 28th place last year to 22nd this year. Professor Shitij Kapur, Dean and Head of School at King's College's Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, said he was delighted at the result. He added: 'It is notable that we have risen so dramatically in the QS World Rankings even before we start our brand new BSc in Psychology this September. We expect that this innovative

course will further strengthen our reputation as a centre of excellence for psychology education and see us climb even higher in the rankings in future years.'

Biophysicist and pharmacologist David Colquhoun (University College London) had taken to social media to express concerns over the metrics used in such rankings, asking 'Who benefits from university rankings?' and 'How are they payed for and how are they monetised?' He told us they were 'statistically illiterate', adding: 'They depend on totally arbitrary weightings of several quite different inputs. Rankings are also published with no indication of errors, something that no journal would ever allow. Goldstein and Spiegelhalter showed in 1996 that the uncertainty in rankings is large, but they were ignored. It's not in the commercial interests of publishers to reveal how unreliable the rankings are.' **ER**

ALBERT WOLTERS PROFESSORSHIP

Ellen Bialystok (York University, Toronto) has been awarded the inaugural Albert Wolters Visiting Distinguished Professorship by the University of Reading. Professor Bialystok researches the effects of bilingualism on cognition and has shown that learning and speaking more than one language can have a significant impact on brain development, concentration and how we switch attention between tasks. Her most recent work suggests bilingualism offers some protection against symptoms of diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's. Bialystok visited the university's School of Psychology & Clinical Language Sciences for a special lecture in May. She said: 'It is a great honour to receive the inaugural Albert Wolters Visiting Distinguished Professorship and have the opportunity to spend time at the Centre for Literacy and Multilingualism. Although less than two years old, this it has already established itself as a leading research centre in its field.'

LITERACY BOOK AWARD

Margaret Clark, Visiting Professor at Newman University and Emeritus Professor at Birmingham, has won the United Kingdom Literacy Association Academic Book Award 2015 for *Learning to be Literate: Insights from Research for Policy and Practice*. The award will be presented at the International Conference in July. Professor Clark's book is the first self-published work to have been submitted for the award. It is available at www.witleypress.co.uk. She has also self-published another book, *Synthetic Phonics and Literacy Learning: An Evidence Based Critique*, also available from Witley Press.