

nursing and medical records are frequently contradictory and do not necessarily coincide with patients' expressed wishes (Aarons & Beeching, 1991; Morgan & King, 1994).

Unless we are to make blanket decisions of policy or rely heavily on proxy consent that may not represent patients' wishes, how are these matters to be decided? At best, the present position hinders research and at worst does patients the injustice of excluding them from important decisions about their life or death.

**Aarons, E. J. & Beeching, N. J. (1991)** Survey of "Do Not Resuscitate" orders in a district general hospital. *British Medical Journal*, **303**, 1504–1506.

**Bahro, M., Silber, E. & Sunderland, T. (1995)** How do patients with Alzheimer's disease cope with their illness? A clinical experience report. *Journal of the American Geriatric Society*, **43**, 41–46.

**Maguire, C., Kirby, M., Coen, R., et al (1996)** Family members' attitudes toward telling the patient with Alzheimer's disease their diagnosis. *British Medical Journal*, **313**, 529–530.

**Morgan, R. & King, D. (1994)** Views of elderly patients and their relatives on cardiopulmonary resuscitation. *British Medical Journal*, **308**, 1677–1678.

**Pinner, G. (2000)** Truth-telling and the diagnosis of dementia. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **176**, 514–515.

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## Evolution and psychiatry

Dr Abed (2000) states that "ancestral females, of course, were never uncertain about the genetic relatedness of their offspring". This is a very confident statement – much more confident than most of Charles Darwin's. Could he provide the evidence that makes him so certain?

**Abed, R. T. (2000)** Psychiatry and Darwinism. Time to reconsider? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **177**, 1–3.

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The editorial by Abed (2000) demands further comment. The author writes as if unaware that 'evolutionary psychology' is only the latest in a line of contentious the-

ories of biological determinism that includes 19th-century 'eugenics' and 20th-century 'sociobiology' (Rose & Rose, 2000). Moreover, the version of evolution put forward by the author has been rejected as grossly oversimplistic by many modern evolutionary biologists (Lewontin, 2000). The author appears to believe that natural selection is the sole mechanism of evolution, which has, over aeons, honed every detail of all life forms into states of exquisite adaptation. Our minds and brains, accordingly are viewed as perfectly adapted to the hunter-gatherer way of life prevalent on the savannah of half a million years ago.

In fact, there are many elements in the living world which have evolved through processes other than natural selection and which are neutral or even negative with respect to adaptation (Sober & Wilson, 1998). The mind and brain are therefore much more complex than is suggested by theories which reduce 'natural' human behaviour to that of a particular imagined past.

Evolutionary psychologists reveal their lack of balance and antipathy to complexity most clearly when they 'discuss' the social sciences. No references are cited by Abed (2000) when he implies, disingenuously, that all social scientists believe the mind starts as a *tabula rasa*. And his statement, "social and cultural factors cannot be considered as separate and independent causative agents acting independently on individual minds" exemplifies both the bias and the flawed logic of his position. Social, cultural, economic and historical explanations need in no sense imply the irrelevance of intrapsychic factors. They differ from psychological explanations as a biomechanical explanation of muscle contraction differs from a biochemical one. So while some, such as Abed, find conceptual pluralism unsatisfactory, it is probably the only realistic approach to a true understanding of the complexities and unpredictabilities of human behaviour.

Finally, there is no mention of the fact that, historically, 'biology-as-destiny' models have been used to legitimate a range of shameful practices, including sterilisation of people with disabilities and vicious racism. Although it is an open question whether such theories inevitably lead in that direction, evolutionary psychologists should at least acknowledge their discipline's own 'evolutionary history'.

**Abed, R. T. (2000)** Psychiatry and Darwinism. Time to reconsider? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **177**, 1–3.

**Lewontin, R. (2000)** *It Ain't Necessarily So: The Dream of the Human Genome and Other Illusions*. London: Granta.

**Rose, H. & Rose, S. (2000)** *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments against Evolutionary Psychology*. London: Jonathan Cape.

**Sober, E. & Wilson, D. S. (1998)** *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Abed's (2000) enthusiastic advocacy of evolutionary psychology contains much that is sensible but its central hypothesis that psychiatry is weak because of its conceptual pluralism is unsatisfactory. Conceptual pluralism may be a sign of weakness but it is hardly unique to psychiatry. Abed's example of a physicist not violating the Newtonian law of gravity is particularly unfortunate. Einstein's general theory falsified the Newtonian theory of gravity nearly 100 years ago, but physicists still use the Newtonian theory when it is useful. Indeed modern physics abounds with mutually incompatible theories, and the mutually incompatible corpuscular and wave theories of light have been jostling side by side for a couple of centuries. If physics, the fundamental science, tolerates conceptual pluralism, then the other sciences, which are based on the laws of physics, cannot be criticised too severely for also being pluralistic.

This has led some philosophers of science to suggest that it is unrealistic for science to aim at the truth; rather, the purpose of scientific hypotheses is to provide a theoretical framework to help us overcome problems that we encounter in nature – the instrumentalist view (van Fraassen 1980; Churchland & Hooker, 1985). This instrumentalist view of science is less ambitious, but given the history of science seems more practical and persuasive. We should not, therefore, be too embarrassed by the conceptual pluralism of psychiatry – we are in good company.

**Abed, R. T. (2000)** Psychiatry and Darwinism. Time to reconsider? *British Journal of Psychiatry*, **77**, 1–3.

**Churchland, P. M. & Hooker, C. A. (eds) (1985)** *Images of Science. Essays on Realism and Empiricism with a Reply*. Bas C. van Fraassen. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

**van Fraassen, B. (1980)** *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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