

Transformations: The history of the asylum

THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

The 19th century, then, saw the creation of many facilities designed to treat and cure people in a moral and healing environment. By the mid to late 20 century, however, mental institutions came to be caricatured as places that almost guaranteed brutal treatments and loss of autonomy. For instance, the film One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, based on Ken Kesey's 1962 book, was highly influential at the time of its release in 1975. But it also provided a lasting image of misuse of authority and misdiagnosis and mistreatment of a patient who lost all control over his life when he was admitted.



Above: Jack Nicholson showed on a movie poster of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest-a movie that also fueled a move to close state mental institutions.

What happened?

Asylums, first seen as facilities for short term care while treatment was sought, became overcrowded, with people who remained there for many years without receiving effective treatment. Indeed, until the 1950s few effective treatments existed for severe conditions, while treatments such as lobotomy and electroconvulsive therapy were overused and misused. Thus asylums became holding places for the most critically ill individuals. Understaffed, and underfunded, they became dead ends for patients who could be confined for little or no reason for the rest of their lives. Indeed, all it took was a letter from a physician for someone to be committed for life.



Left: In the 1942 movie Kings Row, a young psychiatrist faced a choice of committing for life a friend, Louise, whose disclosure of unnecessary surgery would render another friend suicidal, or allowing Louise the freedom to tell her story. This movie was based on a real life story set in early 20th century small town America, at a time when lifetime commitment was relatively easy.