



The legacy of 'lunacy'

Narrated by Sian Williams

Video transcript

"Mental health problems have been misunderstood throughout history.

In the European middle ages, Christians believed it was a sign someone was possessed by demons.

People thought to be 'mad' were cared for within the community or in small charitable asylums in the 17th and 18th century.

At the start of the 19th century, public reformers claimed new county asylums would be able to cure so-called 'lunatics' and teach people they described as 'idiots.'

By this time patients were viewed as incurable and few left asylums after they had been committed. Some patients received dangerous treatment such as having part of their brains removed

Nearly all Victorian doctors considered women more fragile and susceptible to nervous illness. The classic 'female malady' was hysteria and was also applied to 'feminine men.' Hysterical unmarried women were often told the best treatment would be to find a husband.

By the 19th century it was still believed that trauma only caused physical injuries.

In conflicts such as the American Civil War, those who had chest pains and breathlessness were diagnosed with 'soldier's heart.' Military officials blamed tight and constrictive clothing.

When soldiers first started experiencing shell-shock in World War One, it was assumed they had received invisible nerve damage from nearby explosions. Hence the name for the condition.

Many doctors couldn't understand how men were suffering even without any exposure to shell fire."

[Images courtesy of Getty Images and Topfoto.]