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Bad therapy can increase anxiety

Psychiatrists can easily use their powerful role to mistreat their patients

With midterms approaching and the rainy season close at hand, college students are becoming more acquainted with this seven-letter word: anxiety. Last fall, I did more than acquaint myself with this emotion. I welcomed it into my home, fed it dinner and made its bed.

Anxiety affects everyone at some time or another. About 30 percent of the population has suffered a panic attack in the last year. More people suffer from anxiety disorders than drug and alcohol problems, making anxiety disorders the No. 1 mental health problem in the United States.

After suffering from panic disorder — a disorder characterized by repeated panic attacks and fear of their reoccurrence — for almost six months, I visited the Student Health Center for some suggestions. A doctor referred me to a female psychiatrist in the Eugene area.

Psychiatrists and therapists differ primarily in that psychiatrists can prescribe medications and therapists cannot. Psychiatrists generally are considered to be experts. They have "practices," not businesses, and if you don't select an ethical therapist or psychiatrist, some will be more than happy to "practice" at your financial and emotional expense.

When I paid my first visit to this local psychiatrist, I had little faith that she would be of any help to me. I had seen a therapist in northern California over the summer, and she had failed to cure me. Instead, she incorrectly placed me on an anti-depressant that caused me to suffer nausea, vomiting and sleeplessness.

This brings me to my next point about the mental health business:



Psychiatrists and therapists seem to pass out pills like candy. Desperate patients desire the immediate alleviation of symptoms, and chemicals that change your brain chemistry can do just that.

The downsides of these medications are addiction, insufficient evidence about their long-term effects and declining usefulness over the long run.

Most patients don't know that cognitive retraining can change the patient's brain chemistry as well, leaving the patient with tools that enable him or her to properly deal with the affliction — dependency free — for the rest of his or her life.

The program led by my psychiatrist promised to do just that. The entire process would take 15 sessions, costing \$70 each. The panic group consisted of four oth-

er patients.

My condition slowly began to improve. Soon I noticed an odd dynamic in the group. The psychiatrist often seemed to tease the elderly patient in the group, who eventually stopped attending sessions. The other members of the group and I inquired about her whereabouts. The psychiatrist said she did not know where the patient had gone. I found this difficult to believe.

I learned to share my feelings with my psychiatrist: I told her she seemed arrogant, condescending and greedy. I smirked through her frequent jokes about the importance of her patients' payments.

One day, my parents' check for the sessions did not arrive on time. I called the psychiatrist's office to cancel that week's appoint-

ment. Her secretary informed me that I would be charged anyway. After expressing some anger, I told her to cancel the remaining sessions. She notified me that I would be billed for them as well. A \$280 bill arrived in my mailbox a week later.

The next week I bumped into another member of the group, who said that the psychiatrist had said I had quit the group to pursue my education. From my perspective, a so-called professional had blatantly lied to conceal her unfair business practices.

The psychiatrist sent me another letter, demanding that I pay the bill (which had now doubled to equal \$529) for the appointments that I never attended. She threatened to take me to small claims court if the payment was not received in 10 days.

I went to the ASUO Legal Services and had an attorney write a letter inquiring about any contractual obligations on my behalf. I wrote her a letter about the ethical responsibilities of psychiatrists.

While waiting for her response, I visited the database of court cases in the Lane County Courthouse and typed in her name. To no surprise, I found this doctor had taken about 30 of her patients to court and won almost every single case because of patients' failure to appear in court — most likely because of fear.

Imagine facing someone of this stature in court. An expert whom you had trusted with your deepest fears and secrets. A professional you mistakenly thought cared about curing your condition.

But in the end, this Ph.D.-toting individual had no desire to help you. She only desired to take your money. Then, you're portrayed as the "unstable" patient and she's viewed as the respected member of the medical community.

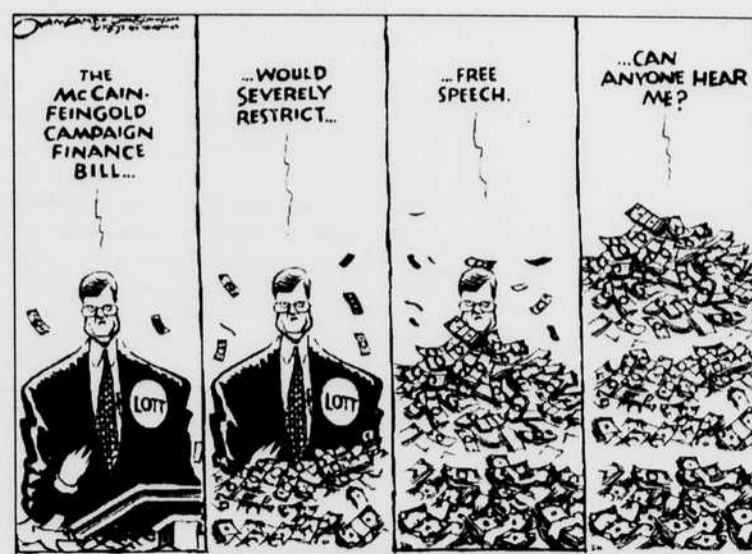
Eventually, the psychiatrist replied to my attorney's letter, revealing that I had never been issued a contract making me liable for payments on unattended sessions. She attributed this to an error on the part of her secretarial staff.

The moral of this story is not to avoid seeking help for mental disorders, but to be certain that you know the background of your chosen psychiatrist, psychologist or therapist. Find out their professional history before signing any contracts. Visit the Lane County Courthouse and try typing his or her name into the database. Obtain more than one referral before placing your trust in any particular professional.

These precautions might sound a bit paranoid, but take it from me: You'll avoid an unreasonably large amount of anxiety if you do.

Nicole Kristal is a columnist for the Emerald. Her column appears on alternate Wednesdays. Her views do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.

DRAWING BOARD



FYI

CORRECTION
 The telephone number for people interested in volunteering with Food for Lane County was listed incorrectly (ODE, 10/16). It should have been listed as 343-2822.

LETTERS POLICY
 The Oregon Daily Emerald will attempt to print all letters containing comments on topics of interest to the University community. Letters must be limited to 250 words or less. The Emerald reserves the right to edit any letter for length, clarity, grammar and style.