Is it possible to treat patients with mental illness humanely and still effect a change? This question was central to Philippe Pinel’s seminal book *Traité Médico-Philosophique sur L’aliénation Mentale ou la Manie*. It was published in France in 1801, and a popular translation (*A Treatise on Insanity*) was published in England in 1806. This book had an enormous influence on French and Anglo-American psychiatrists during the 19th century.

Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) has been described as the father of modern psychiatry. He was born in 1745, and his name has most commonly been associated with the “moral” and psychologically informed treatment of mentally ill patients. Coming from a long line of physicians, Pinel became interested in the treatment of mentally ill people when a close acquaintance committed suicide.

Pinel criticised the administrators of the lunatic asylums, who, with few notable exceptions, treated mentally ill people as dangerous. Most inmates were considered incurable and spent long years behind closed doors, bound in shackles and chains. Pinel’s appointment as the physician of Bicêtre Hospital near Paris led to a meeting with Jean-Baptiste Pussin (1745-1811), who worked as the governor of the asylum. Pussin himself was formerly treated for mental illness, and his humane method of treating the residents of the asylum had a deep impact on Pinel.

Pinel starts by reviewing the state of psychiatric knowledge, reassessing the writings of Plato, Plutarch, Tacitus, and other classical Greek, Roman, and Arab physicians. He then adds his own observations, highlighting the beneficial effect of psychological treatment and a suitable design for mental institutions. He thought that knowledge of the emotional state of the patient was the key to making appropriate diagnosis and finding a cure. In his opinion, observation was essential in understanding the patient. He advocated freedom for patients but also highlighted the need for assertive treatment in some circumstances when the patient had become violent or uncontrollable. More controversially for modern readers, he devotes an entire part on what would later be known as “phrenology,” discussing the association between the physical appearances of people with mental illness and learning disability (“idiots”) and their mental illness.

In more ways than one, this book was way ahead of its time. More than 200 years has passed since first publication, but the clinical observations remains striking. It should serve as a reminder to clinicians and scientists who work in psychiatry of the importance of observation and getting to know their patients.

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