

Nature therapy

overlap. In addition the human face of professionalism appears to be relatively undervalued, and there is no link with a role within the local community. We will now try to see if the construct of the mensch helps us here.

The definition of mensch is variable, partly because it comes from a verbal tradition rather than a written one. A definition from the US is: 'A person having admirable characteristics, such as fortitude and firmness of purpose, who radiates a kind of fundamental decency'.¹³ A further even shorter definition is: 'A decent responsible person with admirable characteristics'.¹⁴ These attributes may be difficult to define, but culturally communities would pragmatically recognise a mensch, even if they might not agree on all the appropriate characteristics comprising such a person.

It is noteworthy that there is no completely and universally agreed definition of a mensch, just as there is no agreed definition of professionalism. We propose that attempting to define terms too rigorously risks missing the point of acknowledging and recognising the overlap of ethical and humanistic qualities that are central to the constructs of both. Further, as practical, pragmatic professionals working with our patients, every GP would surely be able to recognise the principles involved in both the mensch and professional values. There is now a challenge to every general practice-based medical educator to demonstrate the depth of professionalism in 'everyday encounters' to medical students.

HOW DO STUDENTS LEARN TO BE PROFESSIONALS?

Undergraduate medical students are expected to learn about professionalism, although how they do this is unclear; it has been noted before that previous generations were not overtly taught but rather learnt by 'osmosis'.¹⁵ At this

Natural England has launched a health campaign which aims to 'encourage' GPs and other health professionals 'to make more use of the natural environment as part of the total health care they give to their patients'.¹ According to William Bird, a Berkshire GP and Natural England's health advisor, 'increasing evidence suggests that both physical and mental health are improved through contact with nature'. A campaign fact sheet claims that 'aggression and domestic violence is (sic) less likely in low-income families with views or access to natural green space' and that 'crime rates are lower in tower blocks with more natural green space than identical tower blocks with no surrounding vegetation' (no references provided).

Dr Bird is worried that 'people are having less contact with nature than at any other time in the past' and insists that 'this has to change!'.²

Natural England's campaign, which is endorsed by the Deputy Chief Medical Officer and the BBC and supported by a budget of £500m of taxpayers' money, offers a curious combination of the silly and the sinister. On the one hand, the notion that a breath of fresh air and the sight of a few trees can cure the ills of both the individual and society has the aura of whacky Green fundamentalism. On the other hand, Dr Bird's schoolmasterish tone and his offer of a natural cure for a wide range of social problems clearly appeals to the authoritarian instincts behind New Labour's public health policies.

While Natural England presents itself as the acme of fashionable environmentalism, its roots lie in the tradition of 'nature therapy' that flourished in Germany from the turn of the 20th century and reached its peak in the Nazi Third Reich. Nature therapy combined hostility towards scientific medicine with enthusiasm for homeopathy and hydrotherapy and was closely aligned with eugenics and racial superiority. 'Air, light, a healthy diet and exercise were recognised as the basis of good health'.² Although in its early days this movement drew support from across the political spectrum, in the 1930s it was incorporated by the Nazis and the Reich Labour Service (Reicharbeitsdienst) became a means of mass conscription of the unemployed into conservationist — and health enhancing — rural labour.³ Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal government in the US followed the

German example with the Civilian Conservation Corps.

By the time that Brigadier Armstrong formed the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) in 1959, the movement had abandoned its coercive and eugenic features and had become a benign voluntary organisation devoted to practical conservation work (though in 1970 it acquired a deeply reactionary patron — the Duke of Edinburgh).⁴ In the course of the 1990s, however, when Dr Bird became closely involved, BTCV moved back towards its nature therapy roots, promoting the countryside in terms of its supposed beneficial effects on contemporary health problems. With support from central and local government, and health authorities, BTCV has sponsored a network of 'Green Gym' projects, linking exercise to conservation.⁵

The nature therapy revival has also attracted major corporate sponsorship. BTCV enjoys the support of Rio Tinto, formerly known as Rio Tinto Zinc, one of the world's most rapacious — and environment-despoiling — mining corporations, and Barclays Bank PLC (from which a generation of students withdrew their accounts because of its involvement in imperialist exploitation in Africa).

Natural England's health campaign emphasises the healing power of nature in particular in relation to children and those with mental illness. It claims that nature can tackle the obesity epidemic, prevent bullying, reduce ADHD and improve concentration, self-discipline and self-esteem (it is striking that modern nature therapy only deals with fashionable conditions). In common with current public health policies — such as the school meals crusade — Natural England focuses on the sections of society least capable of resisting the advance of intrusive and authoritarian health policies. Let's hope that the growing revolt against Jamie's school dinners soon extends to the 'back to the country' fantasies of Natural England.

REFERENCES

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