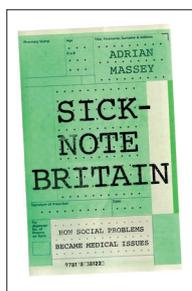


# Life & Times Books

## Sick-Note Britain: How Social Problems Became Medical Issues

Adrian Massey

C Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2019, HB, 272pp, £20.00, 978-1787381223



### RISING LEVELS OF SICKNESS ARE A SOCIAL PHENOMENON

Over 10 million sick-notes per annum may comprise as much as 10% of our workload. According to Adrian Massey, an experienced occupational health physician, most of this is an anachronistic charade. If 300 pages on sickness certification fill you with trepidation, persevere. This thought-provoking polemic is both erudite and wickedly entertaining.

Massey early on acknowledges a debt to the greatest of medicine's iconoclasts. Ivan Illich coined the term 'cultural iatrogenesis' for the destruction of traditional ways of dealing with, and making sense of, death, suffering, and sickness.<sup>1</sup> The medicalisation of everyday life proceeds apace. We the shamans continue to take confession and confer absolution. Meanwhile, the public retains a credulous belief in medical omnipotence and continues to entrust us with the power to adjudicate on their conditions.

Certification is predicated on the notion that sickness is the consequence of disease. Many of the conditions of modern life (for example, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue, and stress) are diagnoses only loosely rooted in medical science. Despite improvements in the population's health, sickness rates have increased along with time off work and the burden of sick pay.

The statistics still startle. After being off work for 6 months, only 1 in 5 return to work. After 2 years, the employee is more likely to die or retire than return to work.<sup>2</sup> The annual bill for sickness

benefit is around £15 bn for 2.3 million recipients.<sup>3</sup> Few claims are fraudulent but Massey estimates that between 50 and 75% of claimants could conceivably re-enter workplaces were the latter more accommodating.

His ire extends to the welfare state as a whole. A grotesque caricature of Beveridge's original vision, he thinks it has corrupted the charitable ideals that originally underpinned it. Better living standards over time have been associated with increased entitlement, reduced sense of duty to work, and lowered resilience.

In other words, rising levels of sickness are a social phenomenon.

Along the way, Massey minces a veritable herd of sacred cows. He takes a big swipe at the use of dubious mental health statistics and is disdainful of venal politicians who have repeatedly sought to massage unemployment figures by reclassifying people as sick. He is especially withering on the effects of the law and a system ill-prepared for 'the assorted roadkill of life's poor driving'. He deems the Equality Act a costly failure.

Massey's waspish wit is sometimes distracting. Evidence apparently suggests that '20% of managers are psychopaths who happen to have made it into the boardroom rather than prison.'<sup>4</sup> (Of what proportion of doctors could something similar be said?) He sometimes overstates his case but this is no reactionary diatribe.

Massey is attempting to address the baleful consequences of doctors' inability to define incapability and his solutions merit serious consideration. Beyond abolishing the certification process, he proposes scrapping existing Statutory Sick Pay and directing those funds to disability and unemployment benefits. This could save £3/4 bn. Extending the period of self-certification and an online Dr Sicknote are smaller advances. His most provocative idea uses National Insurance contributions to build personal pots of sick pay akin to a pension. Healthy employees would receive a small nest egg on retirement. He has much to say about how employers can better improve the resilience of their workforce.

Will anyone listen? The augurs are dispiriting. This is a book for policymakers and doctors but anyone involved in management will learn from it.

Adrian Massey's ideas alone won't save the NHS but politicians should take note.

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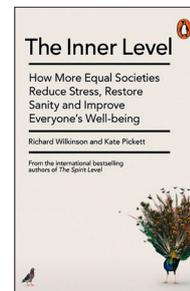
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp19X705365>

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### The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-Being

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett

Penguin, 2019, PB, 352pp, £9.99, 978-0141975399



### INEQUALITY AS IT AFFECTS INDIVIDUALS

This book should be on every forward-thinking GP's bookshelf; but unlike many of the other books it should be read and acted upon! Professors Wilkinson and Pickett are epidemiologists and founders of the Equality Trust, which 'Seeks to promote

public understanding of the effects of inequality'.<sup>1</sup> Their original book, called *The Spirit Level*,<sup>2</sup> has been widely celebrated for highlighting the obvious connection between income inequalities leading to, among other outcomes, health inequalities. *The Spirit Level* prompted an 'Equality Pledge' to be signed by 75 Members of Parliament before the 2010 UK general election, which promised to 'actively support the case for policies designed to narrow the gap between rich and poor'. Sadly, as we all know, this hasn't happened. Wilkinson and Pickett's central message very much supports Marmot's theory of the social gradient in health: the higher the social position, the better an individual's health, and that's not fair.

As GPs we see evidence of the social gradient every day, especially when working at the Deep End.<sup>3</sup> Wilkinson and Pickett's latest book, *The Inner Level*, is of even more relevance to us, and our patients. It explores the personal impact of us living in unequal societies. *The Spirit Level* explained why less equal societies don't perform as well as more equal ones, whereas *The Inner Level* demonstrates how inequalities affect us as individuals. So many of the findings revealed in this fascinating book ring true to our day-to-day experience in general practice. For example, as income inequalities increase, rates of mental illness also increase: aren't we seeing this every day in our surgeries at the moment? The authors show how anxiety also increases as income inequalities increase and we need a multitude of social props to carry on our daily lives. We require more drugs, drink, and greater consumerism to make us feel normal. As family doctors we deal with the impact of these traits in our surgeries

every day; additionally we have to endure the impact of needing these toxic soothers in our own lives. In the book we are shown how there is a greater sense of community and friendship in more equal societies, both of which are key to not just mental, but also physical, health.

This is certainly no self-help book, but is a very readable resource for all GPs who want to look beyond their consulting rooms. It's one for GPs who are interested in how politics can influence equity, and how in turn this impacts on a nation's health. It will be of particular interest to Deep End GPs who require this evidence to be able to present the case for equality in funding of services for their patients; a theme we recently discussed at a Deep End conference in Glasgow.<sup>4</sup> Like many, I've recently been inspired by Greta Thunberg, the Swedish student and climate change activist who has triggered a global climate change movement: 'We can't change the world by playing by the rules so the rules have to change', she has said. Thunberg asserts that we have all the facts laid out for us here; now we just need to take action and do something about it — the same is true for health inequalities. Just look at the numerous reports (Black, Acheson, Marmot) we have had over the years reiterating the same thing, yet inequalities just get wider.<sup>5</sup> Professor Philip Alston's recent report eloquently yet shockingly describes poverty as it is in the UK.<sup>6</sup> It is disturbing reading but sadly familiar to those of us working with vulnerable groups.

Often we read and echo the phrase 'tackling inequalities' in heartfelt pieces in journals such as the *BJGP* and in national reports. This is obviously written with good intentions, but I wonder if it

puts an inappropriate emphasis on the oft-cited 'undeserving poor' to change their nasty habits of smoking, drinking, taking drugs, and gambling: shifting blame onto individuals. The essence of this fantastic book is that it shifts focus and blame towards the politicians, policymakers, and those who vote for them, as it is they who have created this unequal society. It is my belief that it is they who now need 'tackling', and then equity will surely follow.

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