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Obituary: Dr Louis Jolyon West

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LOUIS JOLYON WEST devoted his professional enquiries into the outer reaches of human experience. Over the course of his career as a leading US psychiatrist and cult expert, he examined "brainwashed" prisoners of war, victims of kidnapping and abused children; later his research included post-traumatic stress syndrome, alcohol and drug abuse, pain, sleep problems, dreams and hypnosis. He was able to overturn many pre-existing conceits of the psychiatric community and those of the community at large.

West examined Jack Ruby, the killer of John F. Kennedy's assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and helped convince the court that Ruby should not be sentenced to death. Ruby, he said, suffered from "major mental illness apparently precipitated by the stress of his trial and its aftermath".

In 1976, West was called as a court-appointed witness in the defence of Patricia Hearst after her kidnapping. West, along with four other empanelled psychiatrists, found she was sane and able



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to stand trial but "psychologically damaged as a result of torture". They recommended she be treated before the trial, a recommendation ignored by the court. In a speech after the heiress's conviction, West concluded, "The government finished the destruction of her life started by an anti- government group."

In the 1950s and early 1960s, he aided civil rights workers who led lunch- counter sit-ins, and became the first white psychiatrist to go to South Africa to testify on behalf of black prisoners as part of an attempt to end apartheid. After witnessing a gruesome execution in Wisconsin, he for years led a movement of doctors against the death penalty.

West brought a touch of flamboyance to the business of psychiatry and loved his role as one of America's first celebrity shrinks. Dr Milton H. Miller, a long-time colleague, described "Jolly" West as "above all, a colourful figure, an alive person who loved being on the stage".

His study into sleep deprivation in the 1950s became a national event when West convinced a disc jockey, Peter Tripp, to broadcast live for 200 hours without stopping. The DJ suffered temporary physical and mental illness in the process.

In another prominent study, also in the 1950s, West was appointed to a panel to discover why 36 of 59 airmen captured in Korea confessed or co-operated in charges of war crimes against

the United States. Some called the airmen cowards, others raised the fear that the Communists had found drugs or mysterious methods to induce "brainwashing". West, through interviews with the servicemen, offered a simpler explanation: "What we found enabled us to rule out drugs, hypnosis or other mysterious trickery," he said. "It was just one device used to confuse, bewilder and torment our men until they were ready to confess to anything. That device was prolonged, chronic loss of sleep."

The study concluded that sleep deprivation, combined with the fear of harm and total dependence on their captors, had led the airmen into startling and long-lasting personality changes. West's work saved the airmen from court-martial and expanded the findings to uncover the vulnerability of people in general, and particularly children. He argued that children may become violent when exposed to coercion and violence within their families, and was one of the first to demonstrate that inflicting painful punishment was not a part of good child-rearing.

His belief in that principle led him to study the Tarahumara of the Sierra Madre in south-western Chihuahua, Mexico. In a paper, he described how they held non-violence as one of the highest principles of their society and never physically punished their children. The result, he said, was that the Tarahumara children grew up without learning expressions of anger or rage, and violent crimes were almost unknown amongst the tribe.

West's belief in non-violence would lead him into confrontation in the early 1970s when he proposed the establishment of a centre to be the "world's first and only centre for the study of interpersonal violence". However, his proposal included descriptions of human experiments, including psychosurgery to alter behaviour. The plan drew vehement protest, despite support from the then Governor of California, Ronald Reagan, failed.

Louis Jolyon West was born in Brooklyn, New York, to a Ukrainian immigrant and a Brooklyn piano teacher. He received his medical degree from the University of Minnesota and did his psychiatric residency at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. At the age of 29 he became chairman of the psychiatry department at the University of Oklahoma School of Medicine, where he remained until 1969, when he became chairman of psychiatry and head of the Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

West retired in 1989 but remained a prominent and popular figure in psychiatry. In 1997, he was sought out to give his insight on cults when the Heaven's Gate cult staged a mass suicide in San Diego to join, as they saw it, their saviours following in the tail of a passing asteroid.

Louis Jolyon West, psychiatrist: born New York 6 October 1924; married (one son, two daughters); died Los Angeles 2 January

1999. ●

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