

Individual paper proposal

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Title:

Humane treatment and means of control in Norwegian high security psychiatry c. 1923 – 1960: The case of Reitgjerdet asylum

Abstract:

Psychiatry has as a science and a profession not only been preoccupied with curing mental illness, but also with the practical and ethical challenges concerning the control of patients. This paper discusses controlling practices at Reitgjerdet asylum in Trondheim in the period 1923–1960. The asylum opened in 1923 and was a national high security psychiatric institution for criminal or difficult and dangerous male patients. As such, parts of the patient population created an especially challenging environment for care and treatment.

Staff at Reitgjerdet implemented controlling power over the patients through a series of different measures that ranged from the primitive to the technologically advanced. They also involved a varying degree of consent and coercion and differed in how intrusive they were to the patients' body. Coercive measures such as seclusion, mechanical restraints and chemical sedatives were in use. In addition, since recovery was so closely connected to behavior, treatment methods, often implemented without patient consent, could be legitimized out of hope of making the patient easier to control at the institution.

The practices differed over time due to both scientific developments and changes in ethical and professional norms. When implementing controlling measures, Reitgjerdet's staff would not only concern themselves with practical considerations of how to keep control, but also whether and how these measures fitted within the profession's and larger society's conceptions of humane treatment. One key question is, however, how strongly these ethical considerations were present in the day-to-day running of the institution.

Keywords: coercion, treatment, Norway, psychiatry, Reitgjerdet