

Dr. Ruth Kajander Bio File,
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Dr. Ruth Kajander, 74, now of Thunder Bay, stands with Dr. Sam Sussman in the historical section of the London Psychiatric Hospital. At one time, patients were immersed in warm baths and held there under canvas covers in the belief this would be relaxing for them. Kajander remembers when such treatment was still being used in Canadian hospitals.

London psychiatric pioneer gets recognition at long last

By Paula Schuck
Free Press Reporter

A London author and psychiatric historian is setting the record straight about a long-overlooked female pioneer who helped to revolutionize psychiatry.

Ruth Kajander, now 74 and living in Thunder Bay, did her residency at London Psychiatric Hospital (LPH) in 1952 and 1953. There, she helped pioneer the use of Largactil, a powerful tranquilizer which, for the first time, allowed mentally ill patients to function outside institutions.

Kajander, who still practices psychiatry, reconciled herself to "being forgotten by history" many years but a phone call from Sam Sussman changed that.

Sussman, a former social work director at LPH, who took early retirement and works as an adjunct professor at University of Western Ontario, wondered why Kajander and London weren't credited for her accomplishments.

"I think it's a bit of a shame that the fact that Largactil was pioneered and developed in London, Ontario, is not well known ...

"It's the penicillin of the psychiatric industry," Sussman said during a break from interviews for the book he's writing about Kajander and London's claim to fame.

When Kajander first came to Canada to study psychiatry she was astonished many treatments she considered "medieval" were still being used.

Patients drugged with morphine and opium were left so sedated they couldn't eat or drink and in many cases they died.

At the time, psychiatry no longer used restraining devices like the patient crib, which resembled a small wooden cage complete with lock. But hydrotherapy was still being used in Kajander's early career.

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Sam Sussman, a former social work director at LPH

At the London hospital, the room where hydrotherapy patients were once restrained beneath a heavy canvas and immersed in a full bathtub still exists. So does the crib, but it's in the hospital's archives. Neither has been used for decades.

Kajander was spurred to seek medications that would allow patients to function consciously in society without restraints, either physical or pharmaceutical.

Largactil, also known as chlorpromazine, was used as an anesthetic, but Kajander wondered if it might be effective at soothing anxiety symptoms and psychotic states in the mentally ill.

At almost the same time, a Montreal doctor, Hans Lehman [*sic*], was working on adapting Largactil for use in psychiatry.

Lehman [*sic*] is widely credited with developing the drug, but Sussman's research shows Kajander and LPH had a one-month jump on him.

"Up until the mid-50s, psychiatric hospitals like this one had populations of 1,700 to 1,800 patients whose chances of being discharged were virtually nil," Sussman said.

Almost half of all hospital beds occupied by the mentally ill, so the adaptation of Largactil led to "a massive exodus of patients," Sussman said.

Growing up in Germany, witnessing Adolph Hitler's rise to power peaked Kajander's interest in the human mind. "I wanted to know what on earth made someone like Hitler tick?"

As one of the few females in psychiatry in 1950 and a German immigrant to Canada after the Second World War, Kajander was used to handling discrimination. She was discouraged from pursuing a career in academics.

"I was told as a woman and as a German, there would never be a place for me at the University of Toronto."

The same factors have denied Kajander recognition for her ground-breaking contributions to the field, Sussman said. "We are to rectify this situation."

Sussman's book is to be launched at the Canadian Psychiatric Association's general conference in Toronto in September.

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