

Benzodiazepine sex fantasies: acquittal of dentist

On Feb 5, 1990, Mr George Larah, a dentist, was acquitted of sexually assaulting seven women who had been given diazepam for dental treatment. The judge, Mr Justice Hodgson, directed the jury to a verdict of not guilty. At the conclusion of the prosecution case and having heard medical evidence from Prof Thomas Healey (University of Manchester), counsel for the defence had applied for the charges to be dismissed.

Professor Healey's evidence accepted the findings of Prof J.W. Dundee that 1 woman in 200 given large doses of benzodiazepines experiences sexual fantasies, including fantasies of sexual assault in circumstances where this could not have happened.¹⁻⁴ The first case of benzodiazepine-induced sexual fantasy to be recorded in the UK was in 1981. Since then Dundee has been notified of 43 such cases, and the number is mounting.⁵ The judge was impressed by this evidence. The women gave what they believed to be accurate accounts. The danger, the judge said, is that they may be mistaken — "that their recollection honestly believed in is of an unreal and not a real experience... It is clear that there is a mounting body of evidence that patients under sedation from this class of drugs do sometimes experience erotic fantasies".

The assaults were alleged to have taken place over a period of more than two years, but none of the attacks was corroborated or confirmed and some of the complaints were not made until months or years afterwards. This made it impossible for the dentist to recollect individual patients and left the defendant with no defence other than a straight denial.

Current guidelines from the General Dental Council require dentists using such sedatives to administer them only when a third qualified person is present to monitor the patient's condition. Failure to arrange this renders a dentist liable to a charge of serious professional misconduct. At another criminal trial heard a few months ago, another dentist, Mr Stuart Allen, was charged with sexually assaulting four female patients who had been sedated with benzodiazepines. Dundee gave evidence for the defence. The jury convicted on two charges. An appeal is due to be heard shortly. No charge of sexual assault has been brought by a male patient against dentists or doctors, male or female.

There are several possible explanations for the low incidence of recorded fantasies and/or complaints reported by men sedated by benzodiazepines. There may be fewer occasions when men receive benzodiazepine sedation from a dentist; benzodiazepines may not prompt hallucinations or fantasies in men as readily as they do in women; or such fantasies may be experienced as enjoyable.

According to Dr Malcolm Weller, a consultant psychiatrist at Friern Hospital, London, a person who represses sexual yearnings and awareness will have greater propensity to release sexual fantasies under the effects of a disinhibiting drug. Thus, argues Weller, since most men regularly indulge in sexual fantasies, fewer repressed urges will be available for release. It is women who have the greatest defences against their underlying sexuality who are likely to experience release with benzodiazepines and to be most disturbed and embarrassed by them.

The disinhibiting effects of benzodiazepine apart, it should not be forgotten that sexual fondling of patients by medical staff may happen occasionally, and it may not always be male to female. A consultant told me that some thirty years ago, when

homosexuality was still a crime in the UK, he had observed a very senior male doctor fondling an anaesthetised man. Others apparently had seen the doctor do this many times. My informant was told to mind his own business—the patient did not know and no harm was done. One wonders whether the patient awoke with any fantasies or memories and what he made of them. I hope that such behaviour today, if observed, would not be tolerated, but would a junior doctor or nurse feel free to speak out?

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3. Brahams D. Benzodiazepine sedation and allegations of sexual assault. *Lancet* 1989; **i**: 1339.
4. Brahams D. Benzodiazepine and sexual fantasies. *Lancet* 1990; **335**: 157.
5. Sapsted D. Judge clears dentist of sex assault after drug-fantasy evidence. *Times*, Feb 6, 1990.
6. Dundee JW. Fantasies during sedation with intravenous midazolam or diazepam. *Med Leg J* (in press).

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