# Survivors reveal trauma of Dr William Sargant’s ‘Sleep Room’ treatments in 1960s London



In the heart of London during the 1960s and early 1970s, an unsettling chapter of medical history unfolded at the Royal Waterloo Hospital, specifically in Ward Five, known colloquially as the Sleep Room. Under the direction of Dr. William Sargant, a prominent physician specialised in psychological medicine, numerous young women—often referred to as the ‘Sleeping Beauties’—were subjected to a controversial method of treatment that combined prolonged drug-induced sleep with electro-convulsive therapy (ECT).

The atmosphere within the Sleep Room was described as oppressive, shrouded in semi-darkness and filled with an air of despair. Up to eight young women at a time, some as young as 14, found themselves bedridden for weeks, drifting into a twilight state brought on by heavy sedatives. Nurses would awaken them every six hours to take them to the lavatory, their movements typically confused and uncoordinated. This approach, often labelled as ‘deep sleep therapy,’ was underpinned by the belief that controlling sleep patterns would lead to significant behavioural changes.

Dr. Sargant, renowned for his singular focus on physical causes of mental health issues, held a dismissive view of traditional therapies, favouring instead the notion that mental illness could be treated similarly to physical ailments. He drew on his conviction that therapies involving sedation and ECT would reset the minds of young women struggling with various psychological issues, including anorexia and rebellious behaviour. Many parents, desperate to help their daughters whose challenges ranged from eating disorders to defiance, turned to Sargant, often without fully comprehending the nature of the treatment their children would undergo.

Celia Imrie, an actress and one of the survivors, recounted her harrowing experiences in Jon Stock's recent exposé, "The Sleep Room: A Very British Medical Scandal." She entered the Sleep Room at just 14 years old, having struggled with anorexia after receiving a rejection letter from the Royal Ballet School. Imrie’s treatment consisted of heavy doses of the antipsychotic drug Largactil, causing debilitating side effects such as double vision and uncontrollable shaking. She described daily insulin injections that left her in a drowsy state, revealing, “I think I had what was called ‘sub-coma shock treatment’…”

Another former patient, Linda Keith, whose modelling career placed her in the public eye, vividly recalled the impact of Sargant’s treatment on her life. Admitted to the Sleep Room at 23, she underwent 50 sessions of ECT, which she described as rendering her “completely helpless.” Following her discharge, Keith experienced significant mental impairment, even struggling to regain the ability to read. Her comments illustrated the extent of her trauma, stating, “I wasn’t happy or unhappy. I wasn’t there.” In a bizarre encounter years later, she confronted Sargant directly, labelling him a “monster” for his treatment methods.

The disturbing nature of Sargant’s practices raised ethical questions even upon their introduction. While he had noble aspirations to spare individuals the prolonged stays in asylums common in that era, the outcomes of his treatments often diverged sharply from patient recovery. Many former patients described long-lasting effects, with one 15-year-old referred to as ‘Sara’ experiencing memory loss akin to severe Alzheimer’s and permanent tremors due to antipsychotic drugs.

Jon Stock’s exploration of this dark chapter not only details personal anecdotes but also hints at a broader and murkier context, suggesting that Sargant may have had possible connections with the UK's Porton Down and various intelligence agencies, involved in controversial experiments during that era. His inquiries into these connections hint at a complex intersection of medicine, ethics, and intelligence operations, although definitive conclusions remain elusive.

"The Sleep Room" serves as a chilling reminder of the past, encapsulating the experiences of those trapped within a system that sought to treat mental illness through controversial, and often damaging, means. The tales recounted within its pages focus particularly on the haunting memories of former patients, embodying the need for greater scrutiny and ethical considerations in mental health treatments.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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