# How the ‘Sleep Room’ scandal exposed dark truths of 1960s psychiatric care



In “The Sleep Room: A Very British Medical Scandal,” Jon Stock chronicles the harrowing experiences of young women subjected to controversial and distressing treatments at the Royal Waterloo Hospital in the 1960s and early 1970s. These patients, many merely teenagers, were placed in a dim dormitory space dubbed the Sleep Room, where they spent significant portions of their days in a drug-induced stupor, referred to as the ‘Sleeping Beauties’.

Operating under the leadership of Dr. William Sargant, a prominent figure in psychological medicine at nearby St Thomas’ Hospital, the ward’s methods blended deep sleep therapy with electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). This approach was rooted in Sargant’s belief that mental health issues could be physically addressed as opposed to being discussed through conventional therapies. Parents often turned to Sargant with hopes that his radical methods could ‘reset’ their daughters' behaviour, particularly when faced with issues like rebelliousness or eating disorders.

Celia Imrie, an actress and one of the former patients, shared her chilling account. At just 14 years old, she was admitted to Ward Five after developing anorexia triggered by professional rejection. During her time there, she experienced aggressive drug treatments, including high doses of the antipsychotic Largactil, known for its debilitating effects, and regular insulin injections intended to induce a state of weakness. "I was injected with insulin every day," she recalled. Imrie’s treatment, as she later learned, was part of a broader, deeply troubling pattern in Sargant's practices.

Another patient, Linda Keith, entered the Sleep Room as a 23-year-old Vogue model. Over the course of her treatment, she underwent approximately 50 sessions of ECT, which severely impaired her cognitive functioning and autonomy. Keith described her state post-treatment as one where she was “completely helpless”, having lost her ability to perform simple tasks, including reading. Her harrowing experiences left her with memories of Sargant personally approaching her inappropriately during a subsequent consultation.

Stock attributes the chilling atmosphere of the facility to Sargant’s authoritative presence, describing him as a figure akin to a deity within the medical establishment. The testimonies gathered by Stock paint a portrait of not only physical and psychological suffering but also of a medical community that, driven by ambition and control, disregarded the autonomy and consent of its patients.

Moreover, the book delves into the ethically dubious connections that might have existed between Sargant’s research and secretive governmental agencies. There are suggestions that his work may have been influenced or partially funded by entities such as Porton Down, where controversial experiments—including those involving LSD—were conducted on unsuspecting subjects. The murky boundaries of these relationships raise further questions about the nature of medical ethics during this era.

“The Sleep Room” serves as a stark reminder of the complexities and potential pitfalls inherent in psychiatric practice, especially during periods of profound change in medical understanding. The vivid recollections of Imrie and Keith serve not only to document individual trauma but also to reflect broader societal failures in the treatment of mental health issues. As the narrative unfolds, readers are left grappling with the haunting imagery of the entrapped young women and the extreme measures undertaken in the name of medical progress.

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

## Bibliography

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2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Sargant> - The Wikipedia page on William Sargant outlines his medical practices, including his promotion of treatments like deep sleep therapy and ECT, and his tenure at St Thomas' Hospital and the Royal Waterloo Hospital.
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celia_Imrie> - This page details actress Celia Imrie's experience at the Royal Waterloo Hospital at age 14, where she was treated for anorexia nervosa under Dr. Sargant's care, involving electroconvulsive therapy and large doses of the antipsychotic drug Largactil.
4. <https://drwilliamsargant.wordpress.com/2013/09/22/william-sargant-at-st-thomas-and-the-royal-waterloo/> - This blog post discusses the methods used in the Sleep Room at the Royal Waterloo Hospital, including the combination of deep sleep therapy and ECT, and the lack of informed consent from patients.
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