

# Suburb News *in conversation with...*

## *...Professor Harry Zeitlin*

Diana Brahams chats to internationally recognised, child psychiatrist Harry Zeitlin

After 40 years 'south of the river' Emeritus Professor Harry Zeitlin and Linda, his wife for forty-five years and a barrister, moved into the Suburb a year ago along with his sizeable collection of old books, his favourite hobby.

he could improve psychiatric treatment by making it more scientific and evidence based.

So it was that in 1973 Harry Zeitlin took up the new post of senior lecturer in child psychiatry at Westminster Hospital Medical School. For the first time, the NHS recognised the importance of a post to teach this at undergraduate level to medical students of whom about 25% would become GPs and who would often find themselves as the first port of call for help with children who had emotional and behavioural problems. Eighteen years later, in 1991, Zeitlin became Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, a post he was to hold for 10 years, at University College, London, where he was voted 'Best Teacher' several times, and at the same time, was also a consultant to North Essex Mental Health until he retired from the NHS in March 2011. He has been actively engaged in research for forty-five years but now concentrates on his medico-legal practice as an 'Expert' witness where his advice is regularly sought to assist the courts. Many of these cases involve the family courts with issues ranging from child abuse, parental separation, divorce and contact battles. In his years as a consultant to a population of 300,000 in West Essex he and his clinical team saw as many as 1,000 referrals a year encompassing all forms of emotional and behavioural disturbance.

I asked him whether he felt "the child was the father of the man" in mental health terms to which he replied that early behavioural abnormality was seen more in boys whereas later onset symptoms were pretty evenly spread between girls and boys. His early research showed links between childhood and adult problems, and stressing the importance of investing in child mental health services; prevention is always better than cure. Unfortunately there is a great shortfall in funding with child mental health services receiving only a fraction of those being spent on 'picking up the pieces' in adults.

When he switched to psychiatry in 1967, he believed, as he still does, that mental illness is strongly linked to brain function though at that time this was not universally accepted. Medication was at that time becoming more available (e.g. anti-depressives and anxiolytics such as benzodiazepines) and fortunately reducing the use of lobotomies and strait jackets. Psychological treatment was tilted heavily towards psycho-analysis, which whilst useful for some problems, had become a perceived panacea. Years earlier Sigmund Freud, the pioneer in analysis, had developed his theories from a neurological base. As Zeitlin explained, psychiatry has moved on but definitions in psychiatry are still relatively imprecise often simply describing manifestations. For

example ADHD probably includes at least half a dozen different disorders that just look alike. We have moved back in many other ways; about 25% of young male prisoners are thought to show ADHD type dysfunction.

Would you legalise cannabis? "No." Professor Zeitlin remains firmly opposed to legalising cannabis and other illicit drugs. "The drug problem in the UK is huge" and there is a clear link between taking illicit drugs and the triggering or aggravation of psychological problems. Psychotic symptoms are four or five times more common in those using cannabis than the rest of the population. Falling school performance in a teenager has a high probability of being drug related. A study carried out in Essex some 10 to 15 years ago revealed that by age 16 to 17 almost half the youngsters had tried drugs; most probably the proportion would be over 50% by age 18. It is said that problems related to alcohol are greater than those from drugs. If so, do we really want to put drugs on a par?

How about Barnet? How good are we here?

"We need more child mental health services in Barnet until age 18."

And not just in Barnet! As The Times noted on 8 January (page 2), "The alarming state of children's mental health services is to be investigated by Anne Longfield, the children's commissioner, in an urgent

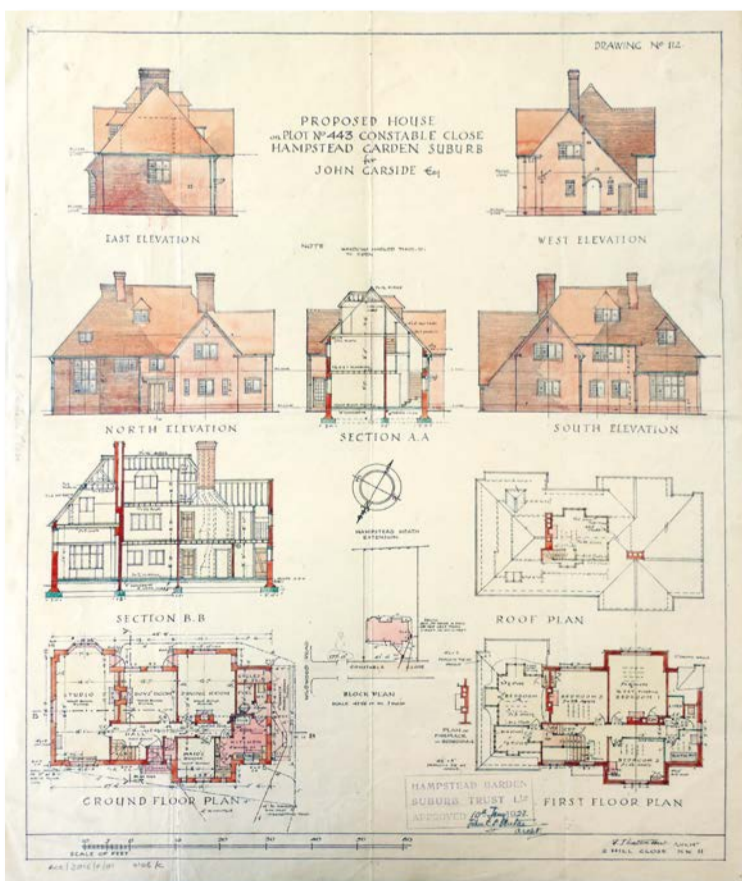
attempt to establish how young people are being failed by the system." Her "lightning" report is due to be published in May at the latest.

Professor Zeitlin is wary of future trends: "We are at a huge cross roads. On the one hand there are important scientific advances that can help our

understanding in quite fundamental ways (e.g., MRI's functional imaging and genetics). On the other hand there is current huge pressure for 'tick box' diagnosis and medical thinking – so "if it fits the list that is what you have got", and this could freeze progress for a very long time **S**



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Are you looking for a copy of the original architectural drawing of your home? Drawings of most Suburb buildings are held at the London Metropolitan Archives in Clerkenwell.

Prints can be purchased online for home delivery. The LMA's Suburb holdings also include subsequent alterations to buildings, and other Suburb-related ephemera.

The collection can be searched online at [www.lma.gov.uk](http://www.lma.gov.uk) or you can call the London Metropolitan Archives on 020 7332 3820.

Original drawings can also be helpful if you are looking to restore original features. Remember that if you want to make any external alterations to your Suburb property, you will need prior written consent from the Trust.

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For further advice, please refer to the Design Guidance, available from [www.hgsttrust.org](http://www.hgsttrust.org) or call the Trust office on 020 8455 1066.

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