

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat - and Other Clinical Tales

By Oliver Sacks

A Touchstone Book published by Simon and Schuster, 1998¹

Note: Some of the language and terms used in this book to describe patients are outdated and now understood as pejorative and stigmatizing. This may make both the book and the excerpts below difficult for some to read.

Summary²

In this book, physician Oliver Sacks describes more than twenty case histories of patients with various neurological disorders. In several of the chapters Sack's recounts his first encounter of unusual neurological conditions. In the post script that follows each chapter, Sacks reflects on the specific case in a wider context, comparing his findings with similar cases reported by other doctors. He describes cases of patients whose limbs seem alien to them; severe cases of Tourette's syndrome; cases of patients who are intellectually disabled but gifted with artistic or mathematical talents; and cases of patients who are neurologically impaired and no longer able to recognize objects or people.

Ethical Issues:

Doctor patient relationship

Labelling and stigma

Intellectual disability

Confidentiality of patients

Discussion questions:

- The physician-journalist must balance the ethical and legal obligation of the physician to 'do no harm' to patients with the ethical obligation to tell the truth when quoting conversations with their patients. Like many other physician journalists, Oliver Sacks uses his patients as subjects for stories. Discuss how patient confidentiality can best be protected when using patients as case examples in journalist writing.³ Is the critique that Sacks is the "man who mistook his patients for a literary career" fair?

¹ Eight chapters of this book were first published during the period 1970-1985.

² Adapted from publisher's summary.

³ To stimulate the discussion see Tom Linden (2011) A Delicate Balance—Ethical Standards for Physician-Journalists. *AMA Journal of Ethics*, 2011 Vol 13(7):490-493. <http://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/2011/07/pfori-1107.html>

- In ‘The Lost Mariner’, Sacks is dealing with a patient who has Korsakov’s Syndrome and suffers from retrograde amnesia because of this. The patient, Jimmy, doesn’t recall having a conversation with Dr. Sacks and therefore is surprised to find that Sacks has a lot of information about him in his chart. Explaining to Jimmy what his problem is, Sacks says, “I’ll tell you a story. A man went to his doctor complaining about memory lapses. The doctor asked him some routine questions, and then said, “These lapses, what about them?” “What lapses? The patient replied.” (see page 26). What do you think of Sacks’ use of humor when describing the problem to the patient? Is it appropriate?
- Consider the patients in ‘The Lost Mariner’ and in ‘Rebecca’. How does story telling contribute to creating a meaningful life in these cases?
- Sacks refers to some of his patients as ‘retarded’ or ‘a simpleton’. Today the term ‘mentally retarded’ has been replaced with ‘intellectual disability’ or ‘developmental disability’. What is the difference between referring to someone as ‘mentally retarded’ versus ‘having developmental disability’?⁴

Discuss the following passages from the book:

- Page 177: “A man may be very ‘low’ intellectually – unable to put a key to a door, much less understand the Newtonian laws of motion, wholly unable to comprehend the world *as concepts*, and yet fully able, and indeed gifted, in understanding the world *as concreteness, as symbols*. This is the other side, the almost sublime other side, of the singular creatures, the gifted simpletons, Martin, José, and the Twins.
- Page 185: “We removed Rebecca from the workshop she hates, and managed to enrol her in a special theatre group. She loved this – it composed her; she did amazingly well: she became a complete person, poised, fluent, with style, in each role. And now if one sees Rebecca on stage, for theatre and the theatre group soon became her life, one would never even guess that she was mentally defective.”
- Page 210: “Nadia too was subjected to a therapeutic regime ‘to find ways in which her potentialities in other directions could be maximized’. The net effect was that she started talking – and stopped drawing. Nigel Dennis comments: ‘we are left with a genius who has had her genius removed, leaving nothing behind but a general defectiveness. What are we supposed to think about such curious cure?’

⁴ Nash C, Hawkins A, Kawchuk J, Shea S. (2012) What’s in a name? Attitudes surrounding the use of the term “mental retardation”. *Paediatrics & Child Health* 17(2): 71-74.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3299349/>