

Medicine is under-politicised in the UK

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UK ministers are claiming ill health is over-medicalised in the UK. It isn't. It's under-politicised instead. It's neoliberalism that is making us ill, but they refuse to recognise that fact.

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This is the transcript:

Medicine is under-politicised in the UK at present.

I think many people will be surprised to hear me say that because what they're used to hearing is Wes Streeting, our Health Secretary, saying that medicine is over-medicalised at present, particularly when it comes to mental ill health.

Well, he's right to an extent and again, I think most people will be surprised to hear me say that. But the reason why he's right is for reasons that he does not understand.

Like most Labour ministers, he's out of his depth when he talks about medicine.

The fact is that the reason why we have so much mental ill health at present, is that we are not talking about the politics that is creating that ill health. And that's what I mean when I say that we are under medicalising medicine at present. We live in a country where ill health is being created by the choices that politicians are making.

Just look at the recent example of the government deciding that it's going to cut benefits for the most disabled people in our society.

Is that going to reduce depression?

Is that going to reduce anxiety?

Is that going to put people into a position of work because suddenly they're liberated - as the minister's claim - to go out there and do a job that they never realised they could do before?

No, of course it isn't going to do any of those things.

It is going to increase stress.

It's going to increase anxiety.

It is actually going to increase disability, and it's going to remove the right of many people to get to work because they will not have the funding that they need to do so. Everything is almost the opposite of what Wes Streeting says when it comes to health, and this is true more generally.

We have a massive medical problem with obesity in the UK. I'm old enough to remember when people were smaller than they are now. Let's be quite blunt about this. Average waist sizes in the UK have increased by three or four inches over the last 40 or so years. My memory that people were slimmer when I was younger is not false. It's absolutely true. We are simply bigger now, and there is no genetic explanation for this.

There is an argument in medicine, of course, about nature versus nurture. The neoliberals want us to think that it's all about nature. They say every problem that we have with regard to medicine simply requires us to examine the genome in ever greater depth until we find the answer to the problem that they're looking for, which will be another drug.

And look, we can see that with regard to obesity - ozempic, and wegovy - they are the answers apparently to the problem of obesity, but actually they aren't.

They suppress the desire to eat. They actually also suppress the desire to live. They suppress the desire for sex. They suppress the desire to go to work. They are creating mental ill health in their own rights because that's what they do. They suppress. So, therefore they are not an answer to anything in the long term, except they do make a

lot of profit for the medical industry. It's already thought that one in ten people in the UK might be on one of these drugs, many of them privately prescribed.

And this is not an answer to our medical problem. Our medical problem is caused by the failure of our government to ensure that we have safe food to eat.

We are fed with ultra-processed food, which is so packed with sugars that are so addictive that we so overconsume those foods that we end up overweight as a consequence.

But not just overweight, because the same sugars that create the addiction also create pain in our bodies because we are too big as a consequence of eating them.

They create problems with regard to our mental ill health because they give us short term dopamine hits and then deep crashes. They create further problems.

And yet our government is doing nothing to stop this because they will not stop the pursuit of profit. They won't deal with the problem of obesity because it is about profit making in the first case, by selling ultra processed foods, and in the second case by selling drugs to tackle it, which in the end will create more problems all of their own.

There's a fentanyl problem in the USA. We thankfully don't have anything like that in the UK. My prediction is we will have an ozempic and a wegovy problem in due course because they in turn are drugs prescribed in the first instance for good reason, but with long-term and deeply dangerous effects.

I suspect, and I'm deeply worried about this, that there's another dimension as well. I am well aware of the problems of neurodivergence that about 30% of people in the UK suffer from. They just are simply not fitting into the expectation of what normality is, as is defined by our politicians, as is defined by the 70% of the population who are neurotypical, and as is also defined by our economic philosophy.

Remember, neoliberal economics assumes that we are homogenous human beings. It says there is nothing different between you and me, and I promise you there is. I'm not saying that's a problem. I don't want to be you, and you don't want to be me. What we want is to be ourselves with all those little idiosyncrasies that make us up and I hope make us appealing to those who know us and maybe even love us.

But the point about it is, that is not what the government assumes we are. We can see it in their policy. We can see that they think we are one and the same. All of us are, for example, they say willing and able, whatever our circumstances, to go out to get work because apparently we all get our dignity through work, even though very clearly that's not true and very clearly, it's not true that we are all able to work.

So, this assumption of homogeneity is fundamental to the problem that we face with medicine because we are simply different. We don't want to be forced into boxes.

Ask most people with neurodivergence whether they want to be neurotypical, and they'll say no, because they enjoy being who they are. But that is not acceptable to a medical system, which is seeking to put people in boxes.

This is where the danger lies in almost everything that we are looking at.

And it is reinforced again by the world around us. We are told what we must want. Advertising does that all the time.

We are told what is typical by that advertising, even though quite clearly a lot of the advertising will completely miss the point with us.

And we recognise that we are not typical.

We recognise that we are not wanting to be one and the same as everyone else.

And this comes down to the curse of neoliberal economics. We are simply seen as economic units. We are not even seen as functioning human beings.

And again, this is so clear from what Labour is talking about when it talks about disability.

They don't talk about the fact that we need to care for people. They talk about the fact we need to get people back into the workplace. We only exist if we work according to Labour.

They say they exist for the sake of working people, but the majority of people in the UK don't work. They're young, they're old, they're carers, they're sick, or whatever else it might be.

Why should we assume there is this complete uniformity of you and that as a result of this uniformity being imposed upon us by our politicians, by our economists, by our companies in the UK, that we should all be the same because we must all consume the same products and look alike?

This pressure to be uniform is making us anxious, depressed, and ill in a world that is not made for people to be stereotypes, but instead to be individuals.

And this is where Wes Streeting is wrong. If he wants to take medicine forward - if he wants to actually de-medicalise so many of these conditions - he has to change the political environment around them by recognising that some people can't work in the same way as others and some people don't want the same thing as other people might.

We have differing skills.

We have differing opportunities.

We have different strengths.

We have different weaknesses.

All of those things are real Wes Streeting.

When you build a medical system that recognises that there is no one such thing as a standard human being then you will build a medical system that reflects the fact that that is the reality of the people we are. And then you'll treat us as individuals, and then you'll find a cure to our problems. But so long as the economy treats us as this homogenous being, we're in deep trouble.

What can you do about this? I think that's a really good question and one I like to ask often.

Well first of all, learn about this. Understand that advertising is forcing you into a box in which you don't want to be put.

Understand that you may not be neurotypical. You might have ADHD; you could be autistic. You may have issues with regard to mental ill health, which are not of your choosing, but which have been imposed upon you.

And don't blame your parents or people around you because they didn't nurture you wrongly.

The economy nurtured you incorrectly.

So again, let's take this out of a blame game, except for the fact that profit is what is destroying mental ill health in this country.

Instead, let's begin to talk about how it is that we can think about ourselves as individuals, as people who are different and value those differences and respect them.

This is a task we can all undertake because it's about us and it's about how we relate to other people and how we look at other people and how we understand them.

And that is really key.

I don't want to be you.

You shouldn't want to be me.

We should respect our differences and actually nourish and cherish them.

But we don't live in a world that does that. And that's why we live in a world where there's far too much mental ill health, and as a consequence, too much physical ill health.

Wes Streeting is a million miles away from realising that this is the case. He thinks that there's a problem with the over-medicalisation of health in the UK. No, there isn't. There's a problem with the under-politicisation of health in the UK, because politics has not recognized the cause of the ill health we have. When we do that, we'll all get a lot better.