

Letter to the Editor: Redefining Mental Illness (NYT 1/18/15)

Redefining Mental Illness (NYT 1/18/15) conflates two different issues in its ill-informed critique of mental illness diagnoses and the DSM. First, citing a British Psychological Society report the article equates symptoms with syndromes and diagnoses. Just as many people may have fever without infection or feel shortness of breath without having emphysema or experience memory impairment without suffering from Alzheimer's disease, a person may have hallucinations, illusions, false beliefs or bizarre thoughts without suffering from a mental illness like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. The second problem with the piece is that the NIMH's RDoCs project is an aspirational initiative that has no immediate or even imminent clinical application. Its purpose is to guide psychiatric neuroscience research that will inform the definition of diagnoses in the future. The operative principle of medical nosology is to apply rigorous scientific methods to diagnostic classification based on the best evidence available, which is what the DSM does. While we agree with the author that the importance of mental illness must be elevated on the world health and biomedical research agendas, the perspectives and agencies that inform the process must be credible and informed.

Jeffrey Lieberman, M.D. is Chair of Psychiatry, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons and New York Presbyterian Hospital Columbia University Medical Center, immediate past president of the American Psychiatric Association and author of the forthcoming book Shrinks: The Untold Story of Psychiatry published by Little Brown.

<http://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/jeffrey-a-lieberman-md/shrinks/9781478979654/> <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jeffrey-lieberman/shrinks/>