



2008 Congress

of the
SA Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care



Theme: "Turning Evidence into Practice"

Venue: Rustenburg Civic Centre

Date: Fri 8th - Sun 10th August 2008

Convener: Prof GA Ogunbanjo - Email gao@intekom.co.za

Watch this space for abstract calls & early bird registration on-line soon

Book Review

The Descent of Madness: Evolutionary Origins of Psychosis and the Social Brain. By Jonathan Burns

The aim of this book is to present a new and fascinating theory about the causation of mental illness. It has been postulated that schizophrenia is a cost humans paid for the use of language. However Dr Burns hypothesizes that it is rather a cost of the complicated social brain in human beings. The author initially takes time to explain the concepts he will later use in his argument for his theory. And then gives a helpful overview of the direction he wants to take his reader in subsequent chapters.

Dr Burns then critically looks at the evidence that psychosis does exist in human being's closest relatives. And he moves onto examining the evidence for an evolutionary basis for psychosis. He also skillfully discards other theories that he does not agree

with, albeit from well known and respected authors in the field of schizophrenia research.

The book helps change our views of patients who suffer from the dreadful illness of schizophrenia. It helps in trying to provide meaning in their suffering. One of the greatest problems we are faced with in psychiatry is finding better ways to explain causation of mental illness to our patients. We need to find explanations that they can understand and easily accept. This is possibly one of the reasons why many patients still seek help from sangomas, as they cannot understand the tired explanation of chemical imbalances in the brain. The social brain hypothesis is a welcome addition to our aetiological armamentarium. I think it is one that will be well received

by many patients and their families.

This is an interesting read which is enriched by quirky anecdotes from his school trips in Kwa-Zulu Natal midlands. The concept of ubuntu is revisited well, with quotations from Bishop Tutu's work. This contextualizes where he is coming from, thus making us able to identify rather well with the author. The Descent of Madness is an easy read, with very few complex, or hard to handle, concepts. It is suitable for all medical practitioners who spend time treating patients with mental illness. Doctors, who take time to read widely on topics like evolution, genetics, and what makes social beings sociable, will find this book a fascinating read.

Bonga Chiliza