

Obituary

Dr Zaïda Hall DM, FRCP, FRCPsych
Formerly Consultant in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy,
Southampton University and Royal South Hants
Hospital



Zaïda Hall, who died recently at the age of 87, became the first female consultant psychiatrist in the University of Southampton in 1971. Together with her colleague and friend, Pamela Ashurst, she built up the Psychotherapy Department, housed initially in a portakabin. It gained a reputation as a centre for innovation, research and training.

Zaïda also worked at the Red Hatch Remand Centre in Winchester for

delinquent girls. With much clinical exposure to young adults, she discovered that many had been physically or sexually abused and that this was often the source of their mental health problems. For them she was often the first person to listen carefully to their experiences and understand them; a first step in their healing process. These disadvantaged individuals felt lost, too ashamed even to speak about their experiences, but through Zaïda's dedicated and painstaking work many were able to regain a place in society. She started group therapy for female survivors with a male co-therapist and later also ran groups for male survivors of sexual abuse. She published her work widely to promote women's mental health.

Although the prevalence of physical abuse was well recognised in the 1970s and 1980s, sexual abuse often went unrecognised. Girls who complained were disbelieved or thought to be responsible for their own seduction. It was only in 1976 that Dr Henry Kempe, lecturing at the London International Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, forecast that sexual abuse, hitherto rarely seen in clinical practice, would be increasingly reported in the UK as it had already been in the USA. Zaïda learnt from her work with young adults that the impact of such abuse continued into adulthood and, in 1989, with Pamela Ashurst wrote *Understanding Women in Distress*,¹ a book which brought together the themes of their interest. This publication was among the first to point to the long-term impact of childhood sexual abuse.

Later, Zaïda had to defend young women against the charge, made even by doctors, that they had fabricated their stories of childhood abuse. She had to speak out against the too readily made diagnosis of false memory syndrome, claiming from her own wide clinical experience that adults commonly suppress traumatic memories from their youth but do not invent them. Later she became a patron of the CIS'ters (Childhood Incest Survivors) network and played a major role in promoting the recognition and treatment of sexual abuse survivors.

Zaïda Mary Hall was born on 11 July 1925; her unusual first name is Arabic for 'fortunate'. Her life was characterised by a strong sense of purpose, a respect for the individual, especially one disadvantaged or persecuted, and a great love of music and company. She achieved much without being ambitious – simply by caring about what she did and not giving up. Her strengths came from being an only child, a wartime upbringing in which one took nothing for granted, and two wonderful marriages, first to Ruthven Hall, an architect, who died in 1983, and then to Sir Peter Ramsbotham, a diplomat, who had been Ambassador to the USA.

She was educated at St Paul's School, London, and Somerville College, Oxford. Her degree was truncated to 2 years because of the war and she then joined three others to be the first women medical students at St George's Hospital in London. Being a female student and junior doctor at that time she was treated with disdain by the men and was even more unpopular with nurses, who feared she would compete with them for the male doctors' attention.

Psychiatry was not her first career choice – as a junior doctor she started in paediatrics and then did respiratory medicine at the Royal Brompton Hospital. But a move to Winchester, a decline in opportunities in chest medicine and the pressures of a family of four boys demanded a change of direction. From a locum consultant post, at the age of 40, she took a job as a registrar at Knowle Hospital, Fareham, and commuted to the Maudsley Hospital to top up her training. In psychiatry and, more particularly, psychotherapy, she found her true vocation. Here was a discipline that was logical and scientific; one in which the root causes of disease could be recognised and treated; and most particularly, one in which she felt she had an instinctive knowledge.

Zaïda retired from the National Health Service at 65, but continued as a research fellow, undertook supervisions and did some private practice, not finally giving up work until the age of 80. Her interest in psychotherapy never faded and in her 70s she became experienced in the controversial technique of eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) to treat post-traumatic stress in her patients. She led an active life to the end, succumbing willingly to cancer a matter of days after discovering her terminal diagnosis. Her approach to death was the same as her attitude to life – one of inner calmness, a lack of drama, yet deep conviction and self-belief.

Zaïda Hall died on 17 March 2013. She is survived by her four sons, Richard, David, Nigel and Peter, and five grandchildren.

Nigel Hall

¹ Ashurst P, Hall Z. *Understanding Women in Distress*. Routledge, 1989.

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