



Leon Eisenberg

Child psychiatrist who pioneered early studies of autism. Born Aug 8, 1922, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, he died of prostate cancer on Sept 15, 2009, in Cambridge, MA, USA, aged 87 years.

"Psychiatry is all biological and all social. There is no mental function without brain and social context. To ask how much of mind is biological and how much social is as meaningless as to ask how much of the area of a rectangle is due to its width and how much to its height", wrote Leon Eisenberg in 1995. His view of psychiatry, born early in his career when he studied the social context of autism and bred through decades of research in child psychiatry then social medicine, captured both the complexity of the human brain and an interest in social justice. "[He] cut to the core about the balance of the biology of the brain and the mind of society in understanding patients' dilemmas", said Felton Earls, a professor of social medicine at Harvard Medical School.

When Eisenberg became interested in psychiatry as an intern at Mount Sinai Hospital, psychiatric treatment centred around Freudian psychoanalysis. At first intrigued by Freud's ideas, Eisenberg told Harvard Medical School's *Focus* magazine that he came to view it as a "politically unacceptable" way to treat patients. "How could you use a treatment that would take so long per person when the burden of mental illness was so high? And second, there was no real evidence it worked." In 1952, Eisenberg began a residency in child psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital. There he worked with renowned psychiatrist Leo Kanner, who was studying a group of boys with extreme self-isolation,

an obsession with routine, and the inability to make eye contact with others. Eisenberg published the first long-term prospective study of 63 children with autism in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in 1956.

Kanner shared Eisenberg's scepticism about psychoanalysis and encouraged him to probe the biological underpinnings and potential for pharmaceutical treatment of psychiatric diseases in children. Controversy and sensitivity surrounded childhood mental illness in the 1960s, when Eisenberg did the first clinical trials to show the efficacy of dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine) and methylphenidate (Ritalin) in helping overactive children. Establishing that psychiatric diseases in children could be treated with drugs went against the established grain of psychoanalysis and initiated controlled drug trials for children with other disorders. "It had a monumental impact", said Daniel Pine, who leads the National Institute of Mental Health's section on development and affective neuroscience. Pine added that "Leon Eisenberg had a strong sense that the duty of the physician was to use science to help people."

Eisenberg became the chief of psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1967. He brought Kanner's rational, scientific approach to psychiatry to Harvard Medical School, according to Earls, and helped restructure the department "so that it cut across boundaries in ways no other department did". But rapid advances in biological research over the next few decades, spurred by the development of molecular biology techniques, concerned Eisenberg, who cautioned psychiatrists against adhering to a "reductionistic model of mental disorder" and the danger of trading "the onesidedness of the 'brainless' psychiatry of the past for that of 'mindless' psychiatry of the future".

"The recurrent themes through his life were social justice and health", said psychiatrist David Hamburg, a visiting scholar at Weill Medical College of Cornell University and president emeritus of the Carnegie Corporation. Hamburg, former president of the Institute of Medicine, also recalls Eisenberg's involvement in that organisation: "He held our feet to the fire about paying attention to segments of the population likely to get inadequate care, whether in child psychiatry or elsewhere. He was a stimulus and conscience for upgrading the standard of work in child psychiatry."

Eisenberg received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1946. He succeeded Kanner as the chief of child psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Hospital from 1959 until 1967, when he went to Harvard. Soon after his arrival there, he helped structure the school's affirmative action policies and, in 1980, was instrumental in creating Harvard's social medicine department and served as its founding chair. He is survived by his wife, Carola Eisenberg; two children from a previous marriage; and two stepchildren.

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