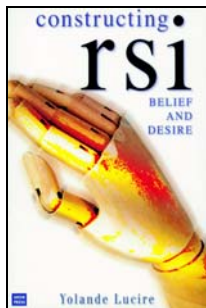


### RSI — a psychogenic disorder?



Constructing RSI: belief and desire. Yolande Lucire. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003 (xvi + 216 pp, \$49.95). ISBN 0 86840 778 X.

IT IS WITH SOME INTEREST that this reviewer, a clinical and investigative rheumatologist who is too young to have experienced the height of the repetitive strain injury (RSI) epidemic, finds himself being asked by the *Medical Journal of Australia* to report on independent medical examiner and forensic psychiatrist Yolande

Lucire's popularisation of her 1996 PhD thesis. Dr Lucire was a significant critic during the 1980s epidemic and still believes that the *Medical Journal of Australia* should have withdrawn several of the articles it published, and through which it irresponsibly contributed to the epidemic.

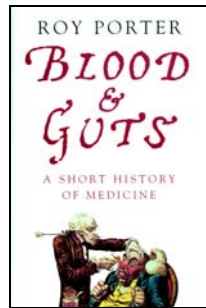
It is clear that attitudes remain acrimonious and polarised on these matters. Dr Lucire continues in her view, even in the "endemic" period of recent years, that RSI is entirely a psychogenic disorder due to somatisation of psychosocial distress. As evidence, she relates the results of her PhD. This was a retrospective case study review of 100 (out of 319) randomly selected RSI patients who had been referred to her for an opinion between 1984 and 1991. She used census statistics for controls, and found that virtually all the patients had one or more personal problems or disruptive life events close to the time of seeking compensation. She also impressively reviews the historical forces of the time, highlighting the lack of correlation between workload and symptoms, and the persistent absence of objective abnormalities.

Hers may have indeed been the most robust investigation of the RSI phenomenon possible for the epidemic, but it is tragic that no serious follow-up study of RSI sufferers has ever been performed. Moreover, a diligent Medline search will reveal more recent contrary epidemiological data and growing evidence for peripheral and central neural changes, at least some of which might not be reversible. The jury remains out as to whether RSI is just somatisation.

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### Vivid history



Blood and guts: a short history of medicine. Roy Porter. New York: W W Norton, 2002 (199 pp, \$33.90). ISBN 0 393 03762 2.

ROY PORTER may have left this earth prematurely, but this most productive of modern scholars had some of his best books still in the publisher's pipeline and he continues to delight and surprise us. Formerly Professor in the Social History of Medicine at the Wellcome Trust in London, Porter brings the outstanding scholarship of our time to the general reader. His vivid narrative enlightens and invites us to reflect on the large questions that medicine and care of the sick pose for a civilised society.

He begins with a history of human disease, what he calls that "war between disease and doctors fought out on the battleground of the flesh" that has "a beginning, a middle and no end". We are reminded that most disease is of our own making, an unwitting product of our drive to farm, irrigate, domesticate herd animals, live in towns and cities, travel, conquer and colonise. Likewise, our determination to extend our mortal coil demands a price in chronic illness, disability and dementia.

Chapters discuss, in turn, doctors, the body, the laboratory, therapies, surgery and the hospital, each exploring its theme with a long historical view from ancient to modern. There is no more lucid guide to Hippocrates, Galen, the Scientific Revolution and the Paris Clinic to be found.

The final chapter on medicine in modern society reviews the transition from the private relationship between patient and healer to a healthcare industry that is integral to the machinery of an industrialised society.

Yet, for all biomedicine's achievements, the health of the world's poor has scarcely improved, while the "worried well" of the West consume a disproportionate amount of the available health dollar. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, after "a golden age of some generations back, the public climate is not one of optimism but of new-millennial anxiety."

**Janet S McCalman**

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