

Can life really drive you mad?

Britain's elite regiments have not had a good press recently, as newspapers have devoted attention to the alcoholic rampages of off-duty soldiers. Some of the most damaging stories surfaced during a bitterly contested hearing in the High Court in January of this year. Mr Justice Popplewell delivered his judgment yesterday.

This was the case brought by Alastair Green, a young officer formerly of the 7th Royal Horse Artillery (an elite airborne regiment), against his brother officers and the Ministry of Defence. Mr Green told the court he had been subject to a systematic campaign of bullying while a junior officer in the regiment ten years ago. He described various humiliations, such as being tied naked to a cannon outside the officer's mess, all reported in lurid detail.

The officers concerned accepted that on occasions, drinking large amounts of alcohol and then behaving in

Most people believe that stress is the cause of mental illness, but a test case failed in court yesterday.

Dr Simon Wessely explains why.

ways which the rest of us, except those in rugby clubs, might regard as silly was part and parcel of mess life, but they vehemently denied bullying or humiliation.

But Mr Green claimed something more than simply being the victim of unwelcome bullying. He claimed that his experiences in the regiment had, in the vernacular, driven him mad. There was no dispute that Mr Green's Army career was ended when he suffered a psychotic breakdown, and that he continued to have further breakdowns after leaving the Army. In court, his account of the horror of mental illness was particularly moving.

The questions facing Mr Justice Popplewell were

straightforward. First, did the events happen as Mr Green described? Second, if they occurred, could they cause psychosis? This question sounded straightforward, but providing an answer proved very difficult for the many psychiatrists, including myself, who gave evidence.

Many people may wonder why the psychiatrists were unable to agree on this simple question. It seems obvious that stress can cause mental illness. Those who have experienced intolerable stress, such as soldiers in combat, or the survivors of disasters, frequently develop disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety or depression, which are psychologically understandable reactions to



Sandhurst cadets: joining the Army, especially an elite regiment, is a source of stress, and new recruits have an increased rate of schizophrenia

trauma. However, they do not commonly develop psychosis. There was nothing understandable about Mr Green's illness, or the terrifying delusions to which he was subject.

Just as those who endure severe stress do not inevitably, or even frequently, develop psychosis, most psychotic illnesses are not preceded by severe stress either. Thus stress is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of psychosis. All the psychiatrists agreed that the cause of psychosis remains unknown, although genetics certainly play a substantial role.

So even if the bullying had occurred, did it cause the young officer's illness — but did it trigger or precipitate it? It was argued that Mr Green may have been going to get ill at some time, but without his experiences he could have expected several more productive years.

Most studies have found that people who develop schizophrenia are more likely to recall a significant life event in the weeks or months before their illness when compared to those who have not developed the illness. No psychiatrist would ever neglect meticulous examination of a person's background and recent history for clues about their illness. But simply asking people to recall recent significant events can be misleading. Before it was known that

Down's syndrome was due to a chromosome abnormality, many doctors believed that stress in pregnancy played a role, and studies were published showing that pregnancies that led to a Down's birth were, indeed, more stressful than normal pregnancies. We now know this was an example of mothers trying desperately to find a reason why they had delivered a handicapped baby.

Researchers into the relationship between stress and psychosis are aware of this problem. Mr Justice Popplewell was thus advised to pay attention to those studies that used reliable methods, such as the lengthy interviews developed by Professor George Brown and Dr Tirril Harris of Bedford College, London, and ignore the rest.

The best studies confirm that there is an increased risk of stressful life events in the weeks before the onset of schizophrenia. However, some of these events are rather common, such as illness of a

family member, a minor violation of the law, losing a pet, or even going on holiday — the kind of thing that happens to everyone several times a year. So researchers have concluded that if life events trigger schizophrenia, it is only by a few weeks. If one particular event could be prevented, another one would be along shortly anyway.

The best studies of manic depression have been contradictory — two found an effect of life events, two did not. Furthermore, nearly all the episodes studied were relapses of the illness, and not the first episode.

But joining the Army, especially an elite regiment, is itself a source of stress. One study has shown that new recruits have an increased rate of schizophrenia, whether bullied or not.

So after all the psychiatric arguments, Mr Justice Popplewell might well have felt perplexed. He heard an experienced clinician, Mr Green's own psychiatrist, ar-

gue with conviction from clinical practice that life events did trigger manic depression. He also heard academic arguments that clinical experience, sometimes misleads, and that the research literature was not proven.

It was an important case, and not just for the young man concerned. Manic depression is not uncommon. If life events were the cause of the illness, other sufferers might resort to litigation.

The judge decided that the officer was not bullied and he exonerated all but one of the officers. Strictly speaking, there was thus no need for the judge to answer the wider question of whether stress causes manic depression, but, given its importance, he did so anyway. He was not persuaded that stress caused the onset of manic depression, although he agreed it might be implicated in relapse.

We still do not know what causes devastating disorders such as manic depression and schizophrenia. The person who finds out will undoubtedly get a Nobel prize.

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