

## *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*

by Robert C Scaer, MD

Review by Anna Luise Kirkengen, MD, PhD

Robert C Scaer, MD, trained as a psychologist and a neurologist, has for the major part of his professional life been engaged in the challenges located at the interface between neurology and psychiatry. In the present book, he addresses chronic somatic symptoms in the aftermath of trauma that do not lend themselves to ordinary medical understanding and that frequently resist usual therapeutic approaches. He has chosen to elicit the nature—and perhaps logic—of persisting disability resulting from whiplash injuries. His professional familiarity with this particular medical problem seems comprehensive.

In the Preface, Dr Scaer presents a blueprint of the entire book: a patient's story, the diagnosis of whiplash due to accident, a pattern of chronic and disabling complaints, different types of victimization prior to the actual trauma, and bodily inscriptions that literally "mirror" how this patient previously has been abused or maltreated.

The author states: "I have found that the severity of a person's whiplash-related symptoms strongly correlates with his or her cumulative load of traumatic life experiences before the accident occurred."<sup>1xx</sup> His observations are condensed in two salient clues: first, "... the meaning of the event during which the injury occurs," and second, "... the life history of specific traumatic events, especially those experienced in childhood."<sup>1xxx</sup> Dr Scaer proposes that the meaning of the present and the resonance of the past are the main keys to understand the resulting incapacitation. He addresses this interlinked process of "making pain out of meaning" and "making meaning out of pain" as follows: "The consistency of these findings among patients, and their startling correlations with concepts of altered autonomic physiology, has led me to the inescapable conclusion that clinical syndromes previously categorized as 'nonphysiological,' 'psychosomatic,' or 'functional' may be based on demonstrable dynamic neurophysiological changes in the brain."<sup>1xxii</sup>

Central in Dr Scaer's exploration are the HPA-axis and the Amygdala. Using observations of the freeze-flee-fight response to threat found in wild animals, the author concentrates upon the freeze response. After

having survived threat by appearing as if dead in a frozen state, wild animals are documented as subsequently trembling, which even may extend to grand mal seizures. This trembling or shaking seems to accomplish the unfulfilled intention of fleeing, thus re-establishing the animal's balance of functions.

Dr Scaer hypothesizes that humans represent an anomaly: they are not, when having been in a complete and passive state of freezing, relieved of their stored hormonal load. Defensive patterns of tension and nonaction remain unresolved and continue to act or be reenacted by every new trauma experience. Consequently, the observable, permanent, neurophysiological and neurochemical changes are experience-based rather than injury-based.

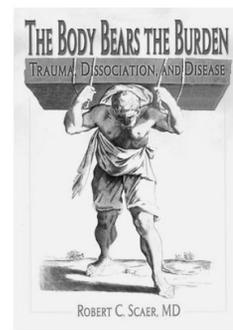
However, given the author's strong emphasis on the meaning of experience, there is a risk in his thesis. If it is personal meaning that is decisive for individual trauma impact, one must be careful not to lose the details of personal and individual situations in the search for relevant activity in the central nerve system. Amygdala and hormones are means and mechanisms in the process of personal medical appraisal, not their causes.

The risk of mistaking means for cause exemplifies the very challenge this book represents. Both the author and his physician readers are trained in applying biological models and biomedical language that is deeply informed by the mind-body split of modern biomedicine. The personal appraisal of experiences cannot be addressed in the biomedical terms and models of brain and body. This book bespeaks the unity of human beings and their experiences; it calls for a joint effort. Author and reader must increase their awareness of the principal shortcomings in the framework, the concepts, and the language of biomedicine.

*The Body Bears the Burden* is a good tool for an exercise that is urgently warranted in medicine: thinking about human bodies as mindful. It may render the apparently "meaningless" highly meaningful. ❖

### Reference

1. Scaer RC. *The body bears the burden: trauma, dissociation, and disease*. New York: The Haworth Medical Press; 2001.



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