

Medical evidence shows devastating impact of decade-long state vendetta against Assange

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Wednesday's proceedings in Julian Assange's extradition hearing began with the evidence of Dr Quinton Deeley. He is a National Health Service consultant psychiatrist, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry and a co-author of a Royal College of Psychiatry report on autism in adults.

On the basis of a standard psychiatric test for autism, a two-hour observation, a six-hour telephone interview with Assange and additional interviews with his friends and family, Deeley diagnosed Assange with an autistic spectrum disorder, specifically Asperger's syndrome.

The diagnosis is legally significant because individuals with an autistic spectrum disorder are significantly more likely to complete suicide. As Professor Kopelman testified Tuesday, Assange is suffering from moderate to severe depression with symptoms including "suicidal preoccupations." These conditions, Kopelman said, are triggered and exacerbated by the threat of extradition and would be considerably worsened if Assange were to be incarcerated in the United States.

Under the UK Extradition Act (2003), an individual's extradition is prohibited if it would be "unjust and oppressive" on account of their "physical or mental condition" or if it contravenes Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guards against "torture" and "inhuman or degrading punishment."

Speaking on the likelihood of Assange committing suicide if extradited, Deeley said his view was that the risk was "high." Extradition is "an outcome which he fears, which he dreads. He's described contemplating it with a sense of horror." Assange had "consistently maintained that he would find it an unbearable ordeal" and that he views his treatment "as an essentially exemplary punishment, that an example is being made of him."

Describing how Asperger's would "compound" Assange's depression and the threat of suicide, Deeley explained that "the rate of mental disorders" and "rates of suicide are higher in people on the autistic spectrum" and that their "ability to tolerate psychological stress in general is reduced." In Assange's case, "his very analytic and highly focussed thinking style does contribute to a propensity for intense preoccupation and rumination. ... It is an exacerbating factor for his depression and his mood state. It contributes to his very intense feelings of anxiety and produces essentially an unbearable mood state, an emotional state which he feels unable to tolerate."

Prosecution lawyer James Lewis QC's attempts to dismiss the diagnosis of Asperger's were callous and ill-informed. Deeley was

forced to tell the court in response to his cross-examination that "people on the autistic spectrum can manage as parents" and that "a person on the autistic spectrum can be dutiful." On multiple occasions when Lewis did not receive the answers he wanted, he asked tersely "Are you trying to help the court?" Defence lawyer Edward Fitzgerald QC objected to this "inappropriate" questioning of an expert witness giving "focussed, intelligent, intelligible answer[s]."

At one point, the prosecution lawyer attempted to suggest that Assange's "concern for children, the vulnerable and animals," noted by his mother in her interview for Deeley's assessment, was "inconsistent with the criteria" for autistic syndrome. Deeley replied that "A person on the autistic spectrum can be dutiful or principled or subscribe to ideals of behaviour and also be moved by the thought of suffering in general of other people."

The doctor explained in summary that by normal clinical standards his assessment "would be considered a comprehensive basis in order to reach a diagnosis." He acknowledged that his was the sole diagnosis of an autistic spectrum disorder, but pointed out that Dr Nigel Blackwood, who will provide medical evidence for the prosecution, "recognised some traits are present." Fitzgerald noted that it was Professor Kopelman who first picked up the traits, prompting him to ask for an autistic spectrum assessment. Deeley added that during his time at the Adult Autism Assessment Clinic, "most [referrals] did not attract a diagnosis of autism ... we're very sparing in the application of the diagnosis."

The assessment provided by Deeley makes all the more despicable the media's decade-long demonisation of Assange as "weird," "immature," and worse. It underscores the tremendous strength of the WikiLeaks founder's character in continuing with his work and legal defence under such a relentless assault. Those who rolled around in this muck—from *Guardian* journalists to pseudo-left organisations and the ex-liberal establishment—are beneath contempt.

In the afternoon session, Professor Seena Fazel, a forensic psychiatrist, was called as a witness by the US government. Fazel has specialist knowledge of prison suicide and the treatment of mental disorders among prisoners.

James Lewis QC sought to establish that Fazel's assessment of Assange differed markedly from that of Professor Kopelman and his colleagues who had diagnosed Assange as suffering from "moderate to severe depression," with "mood congruent" psychotic symptoms—auditory hallucinations.

Fazel testified that Assange was “moderately depressed,” telling Lewis that, based on his visits with Assange in March and June this year, “I wouldn’t classify it as a ‘severe depression with psychotic features.’”

Despite being called as a witness by the US government, many of Fazel’s observations were consistent with arguments made by the defence. He described suicide risk as “dynamic ... it changes in relation to circumstances ... It’s very, very difficult to anticipate with any certainty what someone’s suicide risk will be in a month, in two months, particularly if their situation has changed.”

Under cross-examination by Edward Fitzgerald QC, Fazel agreed that Assange suffers from depression. Fitzgerald cited Fazel’s witness statement, which explained the divergence in opinion on the severity of his condition, “Both Professor Kopelman and Mullin characterised Mr Assange’s depression as severe. One possible reason that my view differs, is that my two clinical assessments are more recent, and Mr Assange has improved since September 2019.”

Edward Fitzgerald QC: “So, you’re not saying, ‘they got it wrong in September’? You’re saying ... ‘this is a condition that can get better and it can get worse.’”

Professor Fazel: “That’s right.”

Fazel concurred with Professor Kopelman’s view that two factors influencing Assange’s improvement were medication and his removal from Belmarsh prison’s health care wing, where he had been kept for several months in solitary confinement. Fazel agreed with Fitzgerald’s statement that “we are dealing with an episodic and fluctuating condition which can be severe and can be moderate.”

If Assange were placed in isolation and removed from his current supports—including psychological treatment, medication, the Samaritans, and his family—he would be at “heightened risk.”

Based on his examination of Assange in June 2020, Fazel confirmed he was at “high risk” of suicide. He also agreed that if Assange were convicted and received a long sentence, this would be a risk factor.

Fitzgerald asked Fazel whether solitary confinement, defined under the Mandela Rules as 22 hours a day in isolation, would affect Assange’s depressive condition. He explained that without the opportunity to exercise or mix with other prisoners, and without family contact, his condition would be exacerbated.

Fitzgerald cited US government sources that Assange might be subject to Special Administrative Measures (SAMs) if he is extradited. If this were to happen, he would “not be able to associate with other prisoners, he would have very limited contact with the outside world and any phone calls that he made would be monitored.”

Fazel conceded these circumstances, combined with a lengthy sentence, would lead to a heightened risk of suicide, with a key factor being “bleak prospects ... hopelessness is an important risk factor.”

US prosecutors had pointed to an improbable array of programs available to US federal prison inmates—ranging from “essay and poetry competitions” to art appreciation and business skills courses, but Fitzgerald explained that Assange would be categorised as a “security risk” and denied access.

Fazel conceded that he was “not an expert on US prisons,” not an expert on SAMs and had not visited ADX Colorado where Assange may be held in pre- or post-trial detention. Fitzgerald cited descriptions of it as a “clean version of hell” and the prison warden’s judgement that it is “unfit for human habitation.”

Later in the afternoon, excerpts from the witness statement of Dr Kate Humphrey, Principal Research Clinical Neuropsychologist at Imperial College London, were read into evidence. She reported the outcome of psychometric tests on Julian Assange at HMP Belmarsh, confirming he has suffered cognitive impairment as a result of his prolonged incarceration.

While Assange’s educational and occupational history had suggested an optimal level of intellectual functioning “in the superior, or more likely very superior range,” tests conducted at Belmarsh showed an “average” score for single verbal reasoning, “significantly below” this optimal level. The report continued, “he was unable to complete a second verbal sub-test as he felt overwhelmed with information and nauseous and performed in the low average range on the amount completed.” He performed poorly on a range of tests, showing evidence of impaired memory and orientation.

Humphrey’s testimony shows the personally devastating outcome for Assange of the multi-state vendetta against him. What UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer described in May 2019 as a decade-long “public mobbing” and “psychological torture” of Assange has had the desired effect.

Yesterday’s proceedings ended with Judge Vanessa Baraitser opposing Fitzgerald’s request for an adjournment after next week’s testimony to allow the defence to prepare adequately for closing submissions. Fitzgerald cited the impact of the second US superseding indictment, entered on the eve of the hearing, recalling the defence’s request for an adjournment had been rejected, and saying, “we still need to take instructions [from Assange] on that.”

Fitzgerald continued, “I don’t think we can do justice to Mr Assange’s case unless we have a significant period of time.” Baraitser responded, “you have the weekend.” When Fitzgerald replied, “We have no time, we are preparing the witnesses for next week,” Baraitser told him, “that’s the situation you find yourself in.”

Fitzgerald indicated he will make a formal submission for an adjournment, after discussing with Assange, with Baraitser replying, “please don’t rely on me granting you that time.”

The hearing continues today.



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