



The toxic legacy of Canada's CIA brainwashing experiments: 'They strip you of your soul'

In the 1950s and 60s, a Montreal hospital subjected psychiatric patients to electroshocks, drug-induced sleep and huge doses of LSD. Families are still grappling with the effects

Ashifa Kassam in Toronto

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Sarah Anne Johnson had always known the broad strokes of her maternal grandmother's story. In 1956, Velma Orlikow checked herself into a renowned Canadian psychiatric hospital, the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal, hoping for help with postpartum depression.

She was in and out of the clinic for three years, but instead of improving, her condition deteriorated - and her personality underwent jarring changes.

More than two decades passed before Johnson and her family had an explanation, and it was much stranger than any of them could imagine: in 1977 it emerged that the CIA had been funding experiments in mind-control brainwashing at the institute as part of a North America-wide project known as MK Ultra.

At the time, the US agency was scrambling to deepen its understanding of brainwashing, after a handful of Americans captured during the Korean war had publicly praised communism and denounced the US.

In 1957, this interest brought the agency north of the border, where a Scottish-born psychiatrist, Ewen Cameron, was trying to discover whether doctors could erase a person's mind and instill new patterns of behaviour.

Orlikow was one of several hundred patients who became unwitting subjects of these experiments in Montreal in the late 1950s and early 60s.



Velma Orlikow. Photograph: William Eakin

“It’s almost impossible to believe,” said her granddaughter, Sarah Anne Johnson. After her grandmother died, the Canadian artist began reading up on the institute, delving into Orlikow’s journals and court documents. “Some of the things he did to his patients are so horrible and unbelievable that it sounds like the stuff of nightmares.”

Patients were subjected to high-voltage electroshock therapy several times a day, forced into drug-induced sleeps that could last months and injected with megadoses of LSD.

After reducing them to a childlike state - at times stripping them of basic skills such as how to dress themselves or tie their shoes - Cameron would attempt to reprogram them by bombarding them with recorded messages for up to 16 hours at a time. First came negative messages about their inadequacies, followed by positive ones, in some cases repeated up to half a million times.

“He couldn’t get his patients to listen to them enough so he put speakers in football helmets and locked them on their heads,” said Johnson. “They were going crazy banging their heads into walls, so he then figured he could put them in a drug induced coma and play the tapes as long as he needed.”

Along with intensive bouts of electroshock therapy, Johnson’s grandmother was given injections of LSD on 14 occasions. “She said that made her feel like her bones were melting. She would say: ‘I don’t want these,’” said Johnson. “And the doctors and nurses would say to her: ‘You’re a bad wife, you’re a bad mother. If you wanted to get better, you would do this for your family. Think about your daughter.’”

Orlikow died when Johnson was 13 years old. Her experience - and the profound imprint it left on her family - has influenced Johnson’s artwork.

“I knew, even at a very young age, that my grandma was not like other grandmas,” said Johnson, 41. “She had a hair trigger for nerves and anger. If someone bumped into her or if we were in a restaurant and someone spilled something on her, she would just explode. She wouldn’t hurt anybody, she would just scream and yell and it would take hours to calm her down.”



A 2016 video installation shows Johnson, wearing a mask made from an old photo of her grandmother, trying to prepare a meal. Photograph: Courtesy of Sarah Anne Johnson

Johnson was close to her grandmother, often spending afternoons at her home while her parents worked. They would sit on the couch and watch TV together, surrounded by piles of books and newspapers.

Years later, Johnson found out that the experiments had wreaked havoc on Orlikow's brain; it could take her three weeks to read a newspaper, months to write a letter, and years to read a book.

"But she kept trying, she kept trying to be her old self and do the things that she used to love," said Johnson. "Now I think that she was just sitting in a big pile of her own failures, every day on that couch."

Similar scenes played out across Canada as former patients of the institute attempted to return to their lives. "It tainted our whole family," said Alison Steel, whose mother was admitted to the institute in 1957.

Her mother was 33 years old at the time, reeling from the loss of her first child and showing signs of depression. "Back at that time, this Dr Cameron, he was this miracle psychiatrist," said Steel. "He was supposed to do wonders with people with depression or mental health issues."

Steel's mother, Jean, was put into chemically induced sleep, once for 18 days and a second time for 29 days. She was subjected to rounds of electroshocks, injections of experimental drugs and seemingly endless bouts of recorded messages.

"They say it was torture for human beings, human torture," said Steel, who was four years old when her mother was hospitalised. "What they attempt to do is erase your emotions. They strip you of your soul."

After three months at the institution, her mother returned home. The treatments had taken a toll on her memory and left her riddled with nervousness and anxiety. "She wasn't able to talk to me about life and regular stuff. She wasn't able to joke and laugh," said Steel.



A 2009 series by Johnson uses a squirrel to represent her grandmother at times, after Orlikow once said the LSD injections made her feel like a squirrel trapped in a cage. Photograph: William Eakin

At times her mother would interrupt conversations to utter statements out of the blue, which Steel believes were the recorded messages she had been exposed to. “She would blurt out something like: ‘We must do the right thing,’” said Steel.

Cameron, the psychiatrist behind the experiments, died in 1967 of a heart attack while mountain climbing, but recent decades have seen various attempts by former patients and their families to hold the Canadian government and the CIA accountable.

In 1992, the Canadian government, which had provided grants from several agencies to fund Cameron’s research, offered compensation payments of C\$100,000 (US\$78,000) to 77 former patients of the institute who had been reduced to a childlike state. Hundreds of others - including Steel’s mother - were denied compensation, at times because they were deemed not to have been damaged enough by the experiments.

Steel, who launched a legal challenge against the government in 2015, settled last year with the federal government, receiving a C\$100,000 payment in exchange for signing a non-disclosure agreement.

The settlement was one of a handful made in recent years, said the lawyer Alan Stein, who has represented several former patients and their families. The Canadian government - while not fully aware of the extent of the experiments being carried out at the time - said the payments to former patients were made on compassionate and humanitarian grounds, said Stein. “It never admitted its legal responsibility.”

In 1980, Johnson’s grandmother and eight other former patients took on the CIA, launching a class-action lawsuit over the six years of funding it had provided to Cameron. The legal challenge left her grandmother fighting anxiety and panic attacks, said Johnson. “And then she would summon, as difficult as it was, every bit of energy and courage and step out and face it.”

After originally asking for US\$1m each in damages and a public apology, the plaintiffs settled in 1988, with each of them receiving a little over US\$80,000.



A 2009 piece by Johnson paints over an image of her grandmother smiling as she balances her two grandchildren in her lap.
Photograph: William Eakin

Art became Johnson's means of processing her family's painful history; a 2009 series uses a squirrel to represent her grandmother at times, after Orlikow once said the LSD injections made her feel like a squirrel trapped in a cage. A 2016 video installation shows Johnson, wearing a mask made from an old photo of her grandmother, trying to prepare a meal. "The doctor took her apart and put her back together so it's an impossible task," said Johnson.

Velma Orlikow's experience at the Montreal institute left deep scars, but her fight for justice is a source of deep pride for her granddaughter. It's that mix that Johnson aimed to capture in a 2009 piece that painted over an image of her grandmother smiling as she balanced her two grandchildren in her lap - turning her grandmother's hands into vines and tendrils that wrapped tightly around the children.

"Those vines, they're just fact. They're not dark. It's not bad," she said. "It seems strange to say this but because of the horrific ordeal that my grandma went through and then going after the CIA, I grew up feeling like I'm from a family that stands up for things. And so this is a part of me now, it's how I see the world."

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