Judging in a Therapeutic Key
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Therapeutic Jurisprudence and the Courts

Edited by
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CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS
Durham, North Carolina
To Judges Bill Schma, Peggy Hora, and Randy Fritzler, who started us off on this journey.
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FOREWORD

By Judge (rtr.) William F. Dressel
President, The National Judicial College, Reno, Nevada

This work brings together scholarly analysis and examples of practical application to an evolving judicial role and concept of justice. The Introduction succinctly describes the history and nature of problem-solving courts, including the integral role of therapeutic jurisprudence to the effectiveness of these courts. The text describes specific approaches and the therapeutic principles, which are the foundation for this jurisprudence.

Every generation has had Judges who believed there had to be a better way to dispense justice. I have heard it said many times that there had to be more to judging than finding the truth and deciding between two positions, especially in certain cases. “Offenders” kept coming back on revocation or new charges taking more and more court time and services. Thus, judges began to look to the social sciences and to direct court officers to use the expertise of mental health, medical, and other professionals. These judges wanted solutions that would make an impact on the causes of behavior so they could do more than just punish the act. Thus, you have seen judges take a different approach in juvenile cases as they sought to fashion orders to change behavior, living conditions, or care received. In criminal cases conditions were imposed and jurisdiction maintained to enforce compliance. The relevance of therapeutic jurisprudence became apparent when judges started asking if the conditions or programs required made any difference. Judges were becoming “problem solvers” and that role increased as courts began to receive more cases arising out of recurring behavior that while legally defined as criminal was symptomatic of societal problems (i.e., homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, etc.). This is a different role, and one can understand why jurists would be more comfortable in turning over the “why” of behavior to someone else. It is time, however, for judges of all courts to challenge their comfort level and seek solutions within the parameters of their jurisdiction to address the causes of behavior which brought the person before the court, time for judges to be problem solvers.

This publication is important and timely since the appropriateness of creating or maintaining problem-solving courts is being questioned. Responsible members of the judicial system raise the concern that resources are being
diverted away from traditional adjudication responsibilities in a time of scarce resources. They also question whether judges should expand their jurisdictions beyond resolving disputes framed by pleadings. Understanding the value of judicial problem solving to address a court’s business and the impact of therapeutic jurisprudence will be invaluable in addressing those concerns. Whatever may be the fate of these courts, an important lesson to be gleaned from this work is that the principles of therapeutic jurisprudence can be applied by judges whenever they engage in addressing societal problems, no matter how framed on a docket.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are once again delighted to publish with Carolina Academic Press, and thank its President, Keith Sipe, for giving us this opportunity and for, as always, being so easy to work with. And we heartily thank Tim Colton, Linda Lacy, and Jay Stallings for expertly sheparding the book through the entire process. The secretarial and administrative work regarding the book was performed at the University of Miami School of Law, and we thank Eileen Russell, secretary to Bruce Winick, and work study/assistant Jessica C. Serrano, for feats of cybergymnastics in preparing the book for submission to the publisher. For research assistance, we are most grateful to Adi Martinez, of the University of Puerto Rico School of Law, and to Abby Meltzer of the University of Miami School of Law. David Wexler gives special thanks to his two deans: Toni Massaro of the University of Arizona, and Efren Rivera of the University of Puerto Rico. He is also grateful to the Dean’s Council of the University of Arizona James E. Rogers College of Law for a summer research grant to work on this book, and to the University of Puerto Rico for a sabbatical semester to do so. Bruce Winick gives special thanks to Dean Dennis O. Lynch of the University of Miami. We also thank the authors and journals that allowed us to reprint relevant articles and excerpts in this book, and thank those authors who have written essays expressly for this collection: Judges Carmen Lopez and J. Richardson Johnson, Professors Barbara Babb, Carrie Petrucci, and Stephanos Bibas, and psychologist Charles Kennedy. And we are, above all, appreciative of all the judges who have guided our work over the last several years. Many have been enormously helpful and supportive. The efforts and help of three of them—Bill Schma (Kalamazoo, Michigan), Peggy Hora (Alameda County, California), and Randy Fritzler (Clark County, Washington)—have been extraordinary, to us personally and to the development of the therapeutic jurisprudence perspective and its application to judging. It is our pleasure to dedicate this book to them.