



## APA 2020 DISTINGUISHED FELLOWS

Renee Sorrentino, MD, DFAPA



Recently all of us have become a “distinguished” group by virtue of our ability to heal in the era of a pandemic. It is a great honor to be recognized as a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and to have this opportunity to share my reflections at such a critical time in medicine. In the past several weeks, like many of you, I have been working to discharge psychiatric patients. Among the many harrowing lessons from such an endeavor, I am reminded about the social stigma of the mentally ill. A Judge asked me to opine about whether a psychiatric patient could adhere to social distancing. Another asked me to evaluate the risk of a psychiatric patient spreading COVID-19. And many asked me to explain how the community would be safer with a mentally ill individual “roaming the streets.” A bleak reminder of the pervasive stigma of the mentally ill.

I have chosen to work with the most stigmatized population, those who commit sexual offenses. However the past few weeks have reminded me of the little progress we have made for many groups of psychiatrically ill individuals. As we as physicians are called to duty, to honor our Hippocratic Oath, I ask that we not forget our role in eradicating stigma.

My interest in forensic psychiatry began in the seventh grade when I wrote a book report on Michael Baden’s, “*Confessions of a Medical Examiner.*” Although warned that I had developed a specialty interest prematurely, I did not waiver. I have had the opportunity to work with a community of greater mentors including Philip Resnick, Marilyn Price, and Tom Guthiel. During my fellowship training, I developed an interest in working with sexual offenders and individuals with paraphilic disorders. I found it curious that the paraphilic disorders were the only Axis I psychiatric disorders that were not taught in residency. Another example of stigma, even among our psychiatry colleagues. Challenged by the ever-present ethical, social, legal and clinical issues that arise in this population, I found my niche.

With the support of colleagues at the Massachusetts Psychiatry Society, I have worked to address the stigma of treating sexual offenders, pedophiles, and child molesters. Although not widely accepted by many mental health professionals, stopping child abuse begins with treating sexual violence. I am honored to have the recognition of Distinguished Fellow, as I believe this will bring integrity to the message I have shared.