This project focused on exploring the application of the work of Samuel Beckett to understanding mental and neurological disorders, and to challenging the traditional narratives used in art and medicine to describe them. This was a collaborative project involving literary and theatrical scholars and clinicians and researchers in psychiatry and neuroscience.
Psychiatric disorders are constitutively disorders of persons (Oyebode 2002) and concern their sense of selfhood. Much of Beckett’s work is vitally concerned with consciousness and the phenomenology of perception and experience, making it a rich field of investigation in connection with such disorders, and with brain science in general.

The project used Beckett’s work as a test case to ask specific questions of the relationship between literature, theatre and the scientific and medical understanding of the mind. Three trans-disciplinary workshops involving scholars and practitioners in the arts and sciences gave an intellectual framework to the intuition of many clinicians that literature offers a means to understand challenging mental conditions. The workshops also explored how Beckett’s work might be useful to doctors, in looking at how attention to the subjective experience of mental disorder might challenge clinical categorizations, and in providing new narrative frameworks to express the experience of chronic and life-limiting conditions. Dialogue with clinical experts in turn offered humanities researchers new lexicons for explaining and describing human experience, producing substantial new interdisciplinary research.

The project’s final outputs include a collection of papers developed by the working group in the planning stages, which will appear in 2014 as a special issue of the Journal of Medical Humanities (Springer). The papers and related work generated by the workshops will be submitted as a book collection (Beckett and Brain Science) to Bloomsbury Press. Methodological advances were also made, with the development of a pedagogical performance workshop based on Beckett’s work and designed for doctors and medical trainees. This has resulted in the commissioning of a series of workshops (‘Beckett on the Wards’) by the Kent, Surrey and Sussex NHS Postgraduate Deanery.

In the course of the project, the investigators have created a working group involving a wider pool of scholars of modernist literature and theatre, working psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, neuropsychologists, neuroscientists and medical educators.

For further information and to view an audio-visual archive of the events, including podcasts of the talks given, please visit the project website: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/beckettandthebrain/