

News, Notes and Queries

THE TERM 'CAUSALGIA'

by

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AMONG the many centenaries which have been celebrated in connection with the American Civil War one which has been neglected is the first description of that remarkable and fascinating complication of nerve wounds which we know as causalgia. There is no doubt that although some earlier writers notably Denmark (1819)¹, Hamilton (1838),² and Paget (1864)³ had described single patients who presented some of the features of causalgia, the first full description of the syndrome was given by Weir Mitchell, Morehouse and Keen⁴ in the monograph *Gunshot Wounds and other Injuries of Nerves* in which they related their unique experience with soldiers from the Union Armies with nerve wounds. This book, which is one of the classics of medical literature, was published in 1864 but although it contains a beautifully written and graphic description of causalgia the condition is not referred to by name but simply as 'burning pain.'

There is in fact considerable uncertainty about who first used the term 'causalgia' and about its precise definition. In 1918 Coupland⁵ wrote to the *Lancet* as follows:

Notwithstanding the courteous help of the library staff of the Royal Society of Medicine, I have been unable to ascertain exactly when or by whom the name 'Causalgia' was first used. Most books seem to attribute the designation to Weir Mitchell, and, although he gave an admirable description, I have so far failed to ascertain from any of his works that he was the first user of this term. My attention has been drawn to a copy of *La Presse Médicale*, dated 20 April 1916, wherein M. Leriche has the same regret as to the inability to find when causalgia was first named. In Mme. Athanassia-Benisty's reference to 'Causalgia' in 'Clinical Forms of Nerve Lesions', on page 31, the following sentence occurs: 'Causalgia was first observed in 1813 by Alex. Denmark, then by Paget, and finally by Weir Mitchell, who has given a remarkable description of it.'

Perhaps some correspondent could enlighten the darkness of this little bit of medical history, and personally I should be glad to hear as to the two former authors whom she mentions, and whether either of them is entitled to the distinction of coining the word in question.

This letter remained unanswered and to the present doubt persists as to the origin of the term. Sir James Paterson Ross⁶ in his book *Surgery of the Sympathetic Nervous System* says 'The derivation of the term causalgia is to many people almost as obscure as the true nature of the clinical features.'

As Coupland states in his letter most books and articles even today attribute the term to Weir Mitchell. Skinner⁷ in his book *The Origin of Medical Terms* states: 'Causalgia. A burning pain associated with glossy skin. It was described and named by Silas Weir Mitchell (1830-1913) in 1864'. The reference here is clearly to the monograph *Gunshot Wounds and other Injuries of Nerves*, but nowhere in this book can one find the word 'causalgia'. In 1872 Weir Mitchell published a second book⁸ *Injuries of Nerves and their Consequences*. In this volume the word 'causalgia' does

News, Notes and Queries

appear. It is used passim in the text but it is not defined. From this one can conclude that between 1864 and 1872 'causalgia' had become an everyday word in Mitchell's medical vocabulary but it does not prove that he either invented the term or was the first to use it.

The answer is to be found in a little known article published by Weir Mitchell in the *United States Sanitary Commission Memoirs* in 1867. In the volume which is entitled *Contributions relating to the causation and prevention of disease, and to camp diseases* edited by Austin Flint⁹, Chapter 12 is headed 'On the diseases of nerves, resulting from injuries' by S. Weir Mitchell. In this chapter the following passage appears:

Causalgia—There is, however, one species of pain arising out of nerve wounds which had never been described except by my colleagues and myself, although the state of skin which is usually found with it had been spoken of by Mr. Paget, who seems to have seen it only in association with common neuralgic pains. In writing of this peculiar kind of suffering, I felt that it would be well to give it some more convenient name than merely 'burning pain', and, in accordance with the suggestion of my friend, Professor Robley Dunglison, I have therefore adopted the term *Causalgia* as being both descriptive and convenient.

There follows a description of the condition taken verbatim from *On Gunshot Wounds and other Injuries of Nerves*.

There can therefore be no doubt that Weir Mitchell was the first person to use the term 'causalgia' but credit for the origin of the term must properly be accorded to Dunglison.

Robley Dunglison (1798–1869) was born in Keswick, Cumberland, and received his medical education in Edinburgh, London, Paris and Erlangen. In 1825 he went to America as professor of medicine in the University of Virginia and from 1836–1868 he was professor of the Institutes of Medicine in the Jefferson Medical College of Philadelphia. Although not a profound thinker he had considerable influence on medical education in the United States. He was a great teacher, lecturer and writer, but he was also a student of philology and a medical lexicographer, which was no doubt why Weir Mitchell approached him regarding a name for the syndrome associated with severe burning pain which he had observed in soldiers with nerve wounds. In the 'new' edition of Dunglison's *Medical Dictionary* (1874) which was published after his death and was edited by his son Richard Dunglison¹⁰ 'causalgia' appears; its derivation is given as *καυσος* 'heat' and *αλγος* 'pain' but a precise definition is not given—only the statement 'of which most distressing cases have been observed after gunshot wounds.'

I hope that the shade of Dr. Coupland will accept this somewhat belated reply to his letter and I should like to thank Mr. W. B. McDaniel of the Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia for his assistance in tracing the elusive 1867 reference.

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News, Notes and Queries

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PROPER NAMES—ZURICH PLETHORA

by

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WHILE listening to a tape on renal tubular diseases, the name 'Fanconi syndrome' came up in the discussion and this started me thinking—not of renal diseases or congenital defects—but of Professor Fanconi and proper names in medicine. Professor Guido Fanconi was my professor of pediatrics at the University of Zurich medical school and I remember his son, who graduated the year before I did, his textbook, and transacting business at the same bank. According to the medical dictionaries there is a Fanconi's disease (constitutional infantile anaemia) and Fanconi syndrome (osteomalacia, aminoaciduria, hyperphosphaturia, glycosuria and aciduria). Further thinking yielded sixteen further proper names that can be associated with Zurich and medicine. If my memory serves me correctly the University of Zurich was only founded in 1833 and the Cantonal hospital and medical school at the same time. The original hospital was only torn down to make room for the new hospital in 1950, when I arrived.

European medicine is, of course, a mirror of its culture and so is tradition bound, i.e., it respects its past and its ancestors, so if anything is achieved at all by an individual he is best remembered by having his name attached to what he described. During my studies at the faculty the professors were Loeffler, Mooser, Bleuler and Kartagener. Professor William Loeffler has his syndrome, transient eosinophilic infiltration of the lung, well known in this country. I best remember him in that I took my final examination with him at his home because he was ill and could not come to the university. Professor Hans Mooser was my professor of bacteriology and has named after him the causative agent of murine typhus, *Rickettsia mooseri*, as well as the Mooser test for this disease. He is best remembered for his humour and vivid language. Professor Manfred Bleuler was professor of psychiatry and author of the text his father Eugen Bleuler began in which the old 'dementia precox' was dropped and the name schizophrenia coined. This is, however, not referred to as Bleuler's disease. I best remember him for his textbook and that after the final examination he asked me whether I had any questions for him. Professor Kartagener gave us a course in ECG