

Annotation

What's in a name?

The concluding article on the College Epilepsy Survey appears in this issue of the *Journal*. In it many minor types of epilepsy are described, some such as the *déjà vu* phenomena are experiences common to many normal people who would resent being called epileptic. Epilepsy according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* means a nervous disease in which the patient falls to the ground unconscious, with spasms and frothing at the mouth. This is what the man in the street calls to mind when the word epilepsy is used. It carries certain social restrictions, such as the exclusion from work with machinery, or the driving of a vehicle, and no one could dispute the wisdom of these limitations in a patient who is liable to lapses of consciousness. Unfortunately once the patient has been labelled epileptic with the most minor attacks, or a history of infantile convulsions, the name alone can cause quite unnecessary suffering, and embarrassment. A boy of eight was seen by an observant preparatory school matron to have an arm which occasionally moved spontaneously, to the annoyance of its owner. The lad never at any time fell or had a lapse of consciousness; but because the word epilepsy had appeared on his medical record card, he was refused admission to his public school. A girl of 18 wanted to nurse at one of the London hospitals. On her medical history form she was asked if she had ever had any fits or blackouts. She had in fact had five fits before the age of seven, but none since. The admission of these attacks meant that she was viewed as an epileptic and turned down on medical grounds. So great is the load against epilepsy, one can understand the temptation to conceal it. It is argued that the public must be educated to accept the disease as an honorable illness, and only to take precautions when they are strictly necessary. Unfortunately the public cannot be expected to appreciate the difference between major epilepsy, and the minor forms which cause little or no social embarrassment. The word epilepsy itself is charged with emotional overtones which are not dissipated by the observation that there is a big difference between epilepsy and epileptic phenomena. For example, a woman who complained of epigrastic discomfort and fleeting feelings of fear would receive little comfort from the diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy, even if she were strongly

reassured that it was nothing to worry about and given a remedy for her complaint. The only word she would remember from the consultation to discuss with her friends and relations would be epilepsy, and discussion of this topic would only increase her anxiety. In the same way it would not allay a mother's fears about a child who had had an infantile convulsion, if the doctor told her it was a form of epilepsy, but in all probability no cause for alarm.

Surely it would be wiser and simpler to find some new term to cover the vast field of epileptic phenomena, and to restrict the term epilepsy to those conditions in which there are repeated lapses of consciousness, conditions which do in fact prohibit car driving and necessitate sheltered employment. Cerebral dysrhythmia suggests itself as a descriptive term, but it can be argued that some epileptic attacks occur without any cerebral dysrhythmia, and cerebral dysrhythmia can occur in the absence of epilepsy, so that the terms are not strictly synonymous. Koch's disease has long been used as a euphemism for tuberculosis. Why not Jackson's disease to cover all "ictal attacks"? It is misleading and wrong to label people so that they can be quite unnecessarily penalized all through life. Surely some terminology can be devised which will be both scientific and humane?

CARD INDEX PUBLICATIONS

The College's card index publications are on sale to non-members of the College and many hospitals are now using the Obstetric Record Card. Members and associates may like to be reminded of the prices of these cards and may wish to draw the attention of non-members and their local hospital, to them, as it is thought that there may be many who would find them useful.

The cards can be obtained from:

The Secretary, the College of General Practitioners, 41 Cadogan Gardens, London, S.W.3, at the following prices (including postage):

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| Obstetric record card | 12s. 6d. a hundred |
| Summary card | 12s. 6d. a hundred |
| Menstruation chart | 16s. 0d. a hundred |
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Copies of back numbers of the *Journal* are available at cost price, also copies of "Report of A Symposium on Accident Management" and the pamphlet "The Health Visitor and The Family Doctor" at 6s. and 1s. each respectively, post free, from:

The Journal Office, Prospect House, Dartmouth.