

One hundred years ago

Loss of memory and of sense of personal identity

CASES of this sort, though decidedly uncommon in occurrence, are of considerable medical and legal interest. The record of a specially interesting case is published in the *Philadelphia Medical Journal* (May 19th, 1900) and recalls the occurrence of a similar case recently at Cambridge where a young undergraduate disappeared from his quarters and was not heard of for several days till he was discovered staying at an inn in the country some distance from Cambridge. He seemed to have had no recollection of leaving his rooms in Cambridge or of any of the incidents subsequent to that event and until his arrival at the inn, except that he was feeling tired and fatigued and that his boots and clothes were wayworn and dusty. The undergraduate was a youth subject occasionally to epileptic fits at infrequent intervals, and it appears that after such a fit he lost his memory and his sense of personal identity and wandered about until he came to the inn where, wearied and worn out, he took lodgings. He had lost all recollection of

his former life and condition and stayed in the inn for some days. Then a second fit occurred after which the memory of his former self returned and he was able to realise his position and find his way back to the University. The case reported in the *Philadelphia Medical Journal* is that of a law student, aged 19 years, living in New York, who suddenly lost his memory and sense of personal identity and found himself wandering in the street of what he considered a strange city. He was so perplexed that he asked people in the street if they could tell him who he was and went to the libraries and hotels to search in the newspapers for stories of missing persons in order that he might get some clue to his identity. He lived at a hotel and after spending five days in fruitless wanderings and inquiries he finally entered a police station and inquired of the sergeant on duty whether he could inform him in what city he was and requested that search might be made in the record of missing persons. When this was done it was found that there was a description closely tallying with his appearance. A detective was sent with the youth to the address given

in the description, where the wanderer was received with great joy by his mother and sisters. To their great surprise, however, he thanked them very politely, but assured them that that he did not know them or the place. The mother told the police that he was a somnambulist and had left home previously under similar conditions. In the youth's pocket there was found a diary in which he had entered the details of his daily experience since the time he left home and forgot who or where he was. "His physicians state that his attack of amnesia is gradually passing off, and that while he shows memory of other events in his past life any reference to himself seems to be the signal for another lapse of his memory." The import of cases such as the above is evident both from a medical and medico-legal standpoint, and it is interesting to note their affinities with such neuropathic conditions as epilepsy and somnambulism.

REFERENCE

Lancet, 9 June 1900, 1670.

Researched by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey

Corrigendum

Common mental disorders in Santiago, Chile. Prevalence and socio-demographic correlates. *BJP*, 178, 228–233. Rows 2 and 3 of Table 2 (p. 231; 'One-week prevalence of Clinical Interview Schedule–Revised (CIS–R) 'cases' by gender . . .') should read:

Gender	Sample size	% Prevalence (95% CI) ¹	Crude odds ratio (95% CI)	Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI) ^{1,2}
Male	1538	15.7 (15.6–15.7)	1.00	1.00
Female	2332	33.6 (33.5–33.7)	2.72 (2.19–3.38)	2.37 (1.84–3.07)

1. Weighted sample.

2. Adjusted by age, marital status, education level, social class, employment status, family type and household size.