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Correspondence

Letters for publication in the Correspondence columns should be addressed to:
The Editor, British Journal of Psychiatry, Chandos House, 2 Queen Anne Street, London, W1M 9LE

BENIGN MYALGIC ENCEPHALOMYELITIS

DEAR SIR,

An epidemic of benign myalgic encephalomyelitis occurred in the north of England a few months before the Royal Free Hospital was involved. The basic clinical picture of lymphadenopathy, pyrexia, liver and splenic tenderness, with objective neurological changes in 20 per cent of the cases, was similar in both parts of the country. The most likely explanation appeared to be a country-wide infectious illness until Drs. McEvedy and Beard suggested that the Royal Free epidemic was due to hysteria (*British Medical Journal*, 1970, *i*, 7) and reaffirmed their idea in their recent report in your *Journal* (**122**, February, p. 141). On reading Dr. A. L. Wallis's account (M.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1967) of the effect of the epidemic on his practice at Dalston, Cumberland, for evidence of mass hysteria, one finds that he describes an illness resembling glandular fever, with morphological changes in lymphocytes in 30 per cent cases but with negative Paul Bunnell tests. The epidemic started amongst primary schoolchildren, with maximal incidence in boys age 5 to 11, but by March and April 1955, had spread to adults, who in general were more severely affected. Some patients showed evidence of either upper or lower motor neurone lesions, with patches of tenderness in the muscles of the legs and hyperaesthesiae in the overlying skin. Mental depression was common, with sleep inversion in some cases. The hysterical features emphasized in the Royal Free cases by Drs. McEvedy and Beard appeared to be infrequent, though temper tantrums in young children were common. Comparison of the two epidemics suggests that the infectious illness in the north did spread south to affect the Royal Free Hospital, but in the circumscribed population of young female adults hysterical reactions were more frequent, especially amongst nurses with a past history of mental illness.

Dr. S. B. G. Innes has suggested (*Lancet*, 1970, *i*, 969) that the involvement of the central nervous system in this condition is allergic in nature. This could explain why an agent could be transferred to rhesus monkeys from patients involved in the Adelaide epidemic (Pellew, R. A. A., and Miles, J. A. B. (1955), *Medical Journal of Australia*, **42**, ii, 480) but could not be retransmitted. The recurrences may be the result of a self-perpetuating immunological mechanism precipitated by the infection in susceptible individuals, as may be the case in rheumatoid arthritis. Certainly, in Drs. McEvedy and Beard's follow-up of cases there is evidence of hypersensitivity reactions such as asthma, eczema and possibly thrombocytopenic purpura in probands and their families.

Acceptance of the hysteria hypothesis presents two dangers. First, the search for an underlying aetiological agent may be abandoned. Some of the cases of the benign myalgic encephalitis syndrome in Japan were found to be due to sensitivity to the drug clioquinol. Secondly, the patient may be labelled a hysteric and denied the assistance he would get if it was considered he had an organic disability. The few patients with this syndrome referred to this centre in recent years have responded to a programme of graded physical activity in a similar manner to those with other organic diseases of the central nervous system.

J. G. PARISH.

Passmore Edwards Medical Rehabilitation Centre,
Marine Parade East,
Clacton-on-Sea,
Essex, CO15 6JT.

MYASTHENIA GRAVIS AND SCHIZOPHRENIA—A RARE COMBINATION

DEAR SIR,

We were very interested in the paper in the March 1973 (pp. 343–4) issue by Drs. Gittleson and Richardson on a case of schizophrenia and myasthenia gravis, because we have ourselves recently had such a case.

A married woman of 51, was first seen in her home in the evening of 18 October 1972. She was shaking with terror and unable to face another night in her house because of the things she felt the neighbours were doing to her with electrical machines through the walls and so on. She was forthwith admitted to

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