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A diary of epilepsy in the early 1800s

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Abstract

This article describes the diary of a man from 19th-century England (1829–1834) that documents the onset and course of his wife's epilepsy after a stroke. Her stroke produced aphasia and right hemiparesis, but her epilepsy was the diary's focus and caused the greatest concern. The diary documents the history of her epilepsy in detail. In addition to tonic–clonic seizures, she experienced frequent bouts of status epilepticus and complex partial seizures. The diary contains some of the earliest recorded descriptions of status epilepticus and its aftermath of delirium, mood disorder, and hysteria. It also offers some of the earliest and most detailed accounts of complex partial seizures. Bleeding by cupping was the only symptomatic or prophylactic treatment recorded. These aspects of the diary are presented, as are the historical perspectives on epilepsy, including early beliefs and stigmas, therapeutic remedies, and early European views of epilepsy.
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1. Introduction

Epilepsy has traditionally been studied from the medical perspective: physicians' descriptions of symptoms, classification of the epilepsies and seizures, causation, and treatment. Scientifically focused documents constitute the main corpus of historical data on epilepsy from the ancient periods in Egypt [1], Greece [2], and Rome [3], as well as the medieval Byzantium and Europe [4]. The legal or religious implications of epilepsy are rarely mentioned in historical texts. Similarly, social implications, beyond an occasional mention that the disorder is associated with stigma, are almost never touched on in ancient sources. Medical texts on epilepsy around 1900 give extensive accounts of symptoms, classification, diagnosis, demographic factors, causes, cognitive and behavioral changes, pathology, treatment, and even medicolegal issues [5,6], but the experience of the person with epilepsy was rarely considered. Temkin's landmark book, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginning of Modern Neurology* [7], provides a wealth of information on the scientific–medical view, but little on the life of people with epilepsy during historical times.

The impact of epilepsy on the lives of famous people with epilepsy has received scant documentation in writings about their lives. The historical literature of Julius Caesar contains almost nothing about his epilepsy, although his life is among the best documented in antiquity. Plutarch offered anecdotes about Caesar's epilepsy, but the diagnosis is still the subject of modern medical reexamination [8]. Details of his treatment and the psychological and social impact of his epilepsy remain unknown [9]. In his personal letters, Dostoevsky provided one of the best biographical and psychological records of epilepsy, and he often included a major character with epilepsy in his novels [10,11]. The vivid fictional accounts of auras and major "fits" were drawn from his personal experiences [10,11]. Even in Dostoevsky's case, the treatment of his epilepsy is poorly documented, and debates persist as to whether he had temporal lobe [10,11] or generalized [12] epilepsy.

Throughout history, negative beliefs about epilepsy led families to isolate the affected individual and conceal the disorder, inflicting social and psychological distress on the patient and undermining his or her familial support. Today, the stigma of epilepsy still is often more disabling

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than its neurological effects [13–15]. Furthermore, with education about epilepsy, the adverse social consequences in modern times are much less severe than in the past. In 19th-century Europe, epilepsy was considered a highly hereditable disorder, associated with a familial tendency toward insanity, alcoholism, violence, criminal behavior, migraine, and gout [5, p. 5]. Gowers reviewed his 2400 cases of epilepsy and concluded that "Epilepsy and insanity are interchangeable in families" [5, p. 5]. He also recognized that some families hid their epilepsy, especially in the middle and upper classes, where knowledge of the disorder in the family could "hinder marriage" and carry "social stigma" [5, p. 4]. Earlier in the century, medical authorities considered epilepsy to be an infectious disorder [7, p. 226], magnifying the stigma and isolation of the affected individual. Among the lower classes, many believed that epilepsy resulted from satanic possession or supernatural causes, reflecting the views of medieval medical authorities' views [7, p. 138].

Living with epilepsy in past centuries was challenging; before the introduction of bromides in 1859 and phenobarbital in 1912, there were no effective prophylactic or symptomatic therapies for seizures in the Western medical tradition. Similarly, there were no effective psychotropic medications to treat the depression, anxiety, or psychoses often associated with epilepsy. Furthermore, harmful therapies were abundant, ranging from the abstraction of blood with a cupping glass to the administration of toxic substances such as turpentine and heavy metals.

How did epilepsy touch the lives of individuals and their families in 19th-century Europe? The effects of the disorder probably varied dramatically according to the severity of the epilepsy, the time of its occurrence (i.e., nocturnal vs diurnal), the patient's social status, and his or her financial and social supports. Although the experience of living with epilepsy is now the subject of many scholarly and lay writings [16–18], knowledge of this experience in earlier times is extremely limited. This article describes the diary of a man from 19th-century England [19] that documents the onset and course of his wife's epilepsy after a stroke.

2. The diary

W. Silke of Mistley, near Dedham, Essex, England, kept a diary of his wife's illnesses and symptoms, including her epileptic attacks, between 1829 and 1834. He made daily entries from March 31 to May 10, 1830, and then made 271 entries over the following 49 months from June 5, 1830, to June 25, 1834, when she died. On the inside leaf, he listed the dates of 35 epileptic attacks (tonic–clonic seizures only) occurring between February 19, 1830, and May 12, 1834. She had six to nine epileptic attacks each year from 1830 to 1833 and four in the first 6 months of 1834, until her death in June. A nurse came to their house on the evening of June 22, 1829, and stayed until July 7, 1834, several weeks after Mrs. Silke's death.

Mrs. Silke's age is not reported, but she had a son and two grown daughters who frequently visited her, and often witnessed the attacks. No information is given about her past medical or family history.

3. History of illness

3.1. 1829

Her illness began on November 21, 1829. Soon "after Breakfast my dearest wife was most suddenly attacked with Apoplexy and Paralysis of the right side." It took her just over 2 months "to first stick her tongue out of her mouth and articulate a few monosyllables." This description strongly suggests that she suffered a large left middle cerebral or internal carotid artery stroke.

3.2. 1830

The first "Epileptic Fits" with severe convulsions of her whole frame occurred at 10 AM on February 19, 1830. Her next attack was a series of convulsions.

> March 31st … This Morning about half past ten my dearest Wife was again seized with dreadful convulsion fits which continued till after four—Mr. Thompson abstracted about six or eight ounces of Blood by cupping between the Shoulders.

Over the next week, the diary entries state that she suffered from insomnia, confusion, and delirium. Nevertheless, she was able to "have her Head shaved" (for cupping). The attack on March 31 was almost certainly a bout of convulsive status followed by delirium and possible postictal psychosis lasting a week.

She was taken downstairs to the breakfast parlor on July 16, 17, and 18. On July 19, she had another seizure.

> 19th … This Morning about ten o Clock … another fit … lasted at least half an hour—As soon as She partly recovered her senses, She submitted to be Cupped, and bore the operation with exemplary fortitude, considering how many times her dear Head and Back have been scarified.

Over the next month, she recovered some strength but on August 15, "in hopes of preventing a recurrence of Epilepsy," her husband used cupping, taking away "about half a pound of Blood." However, 6 days later, she seized, "with appalling contortions of the whole Frame about twenty minutes."

By November, she was able to spend many afternoons outside in the garden.

3.3. 1831

On March 1, 1831, while her daughters were visiting, "She was suddenly attacked with a flushing of the countenance and great agitation of the whole Frame, which has

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