

Historical Issues in Sleep Medicine

Two early descriptions of restless legs syndrome and periodic leg movements by Boissier de Sauvages (1763) and Gilles de la Tourette (1898)

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Abstract

Boissier de Sauvages de La Croix and Gilles de la Tourette, French neurologists, noticed that patients with “anxiety in the lower limbs, shooting pain, tingling legs” may have an insomnia “at the time of wake–sleep transition [and] experience sudden jerks in the lower limbs.” Their descriptions confirm that the clinical features of RLS were previously described in French literature in the 18th century.

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1. Introduction

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is characterized by an irresistible urge to move the legs usually accompanied or caused by uncomfortable and unpleasant sensations. It begins or worsens during periods of rest or inactivity, is partially or totally relieved by movement such as walking or stretching, and is exacerbated or occurs at night and in the evening [1]. RLS is associated with involuntary periodic leg movements that occur during sleep and more specifically at sleep onset (PLMs) [1]. The first accurate and modern description of RLS is attributed to the Swedish neurologist Karl Axel Ekbom

(1907–1977), hence the eponym of the syndrome. Indeed, by the end of World War II, he was the first physician to fully characterize the syndrome, to report series of patients, to establish prevalence, and to link RLS with iron deficiency [2]. Many scattered cases with RLS-like symptoms were, however, published before Ekbom’s substantial contribution. These clinical descriptions of the syndrome can be traced back to the 17th century with a report of probable RLS by Sir Thomas Willis (1621–1675) [3]. A possible early Swedish description of the syndrome was made by Huss (1849) as reported by Ekbom himself [4]. Later, Wittmaack (1861), Beard (1880), Bing (1913) and Oppenheim (1923) described RLS-like symptoms by the term: “*Anxietas Tibiarum*,” considering it a form of neurosis [5]. The first modern description of PLMs (specifically those occurring during wakefulness) associated with RLS was made by Allison in 1943 [6]. Being an RLS sufferer himself, Allison described these PLMs during wakefulness

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as “leg jitters” [5]. We report here two interesting clinical descriptions of probable RLS and PLMs found in old French medical books.

1.1. Book 1: “Methodical nosology” by Francois Boissier de Sauvages de La Croix (1706–1767)

Boissier de Sauvages wrote the first version of this book in 1731 in French under the title “treaty of the classes of the diseases” (“Traité des classes des maladies”). He published an extended Latin version in 1763 under the title “Nosologia Methodica” [7]. He developed a classification system of diseases based on the framework created by Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689). He also applied the binomial methodology (genus/species) of botanists to name diseases. He listed 10 major classes of diseases, further broken down into 44 orders, 315 genera, and 2400 species. Under the 7th class of “Pains,” the 1st order of “vague pains,” the 5th genus

of “Anxietas, Anxieties; ... Restlessness, in English,” and the 5th species (disease) of “Anxietas tibiaram, Anxiety of the legs,” he wrote: “We frequently see this disease in clinical practice, and yet there is no other disease on which the authors keep a more profound silence. We see everyday women, and especially men, gouty and suffering from rheumatisms, who when the evening comes, cannot keep their legs still for a single minute because of the restlessness they feel in, and that movement transitory appeases, and that totally ceases as soon as they go to bed” (translated to English from both the original Latin version [7] and a posthumous French version of 1772 [8]; Figs. 1 and 2). This description meets the present RLS criteria [1], as the patients have restlessness in their legs (urge to move the legs), occurring in the evening, that is alleviated by fidgeting (relieved by movement). They cannot keep their legs still (presence of symptoms at rest), with a time frame nicely illustrated by the term “for a single minute.” This last detail would suggest a

41347
NOSOLOGIA METHODICA

SISTENS

MORBORUM CLASSES;
GENERA ET SPECIES,

Juxta Sydenhami mentem & Botanicorum
ordinem.

Auctore FR. BOISSIER DE SAUVAGES,

Regis Consiliario ac Medico, in Monspelienſi Uni-
verſitate Medicinæ, olimque Botanices Profeſſore
Regio; Academia Scientiarum Monspelienſis, Lon-
dinenſis, Upſalienſis, Berolinenſis, Florentina,
Phyſico-Botanica, Suecica, Naturæ curioſorum, &
Inſtituti Bononienſis Socio.

TOMI TERTII PARS PRIMA,

Complectens

GENERA ET SPECIES MORBORUM

AD CLASSES VII. & VIII. PERTINENTIAM.

Nempè

DOLORES ET VESANIAS



AMSTELODAMI,
Sumptibus FRATRUM DE TOURNES.

M. DCC. L X I I I.

38 GENERA ET SPECIES

4. Anxietas cardiaca.

Ea eſt quæ citra morbum inflammatorium aut febrilem pendet ab obice circulationi oppoſito, intra aut prope cor collocato, ut à polypo, aneurifmate, coagulo ſanguinis, veneno v. g. viperæ & ſimilibus.

5. Anxietas tibiaram. Aſtruc. de Morb. venereis. Hoc affectu nihil eſt in praxi frequentius & non altius de quovis morbo quàm de illo apud Auctores eſt ſilentium. Quotidiè videmus mulieres & viros potiſſimum artbriticos rheumaticos, qui accedente vespere tibias ne per minutum in eodem ſitu & loco retinere queunt, ob importunam quamdam ſenſationem, quæ motu illo pauliſper ſedatur, quæque vulgò decubitu in lecto evaneſcit.

Cæteræ anxietates partium diſtinctarum videantur in ſingulis morbis ad quos attinent. De cætero multi morbi ab anxietate declorantur apud infantes lactentes maxime intra cunas victos.

VI. Laffitudo. Laffitude. Græcis Copos. Anglis Wearineſſ. Italis Sirachezza. Hiſpanis Canſancio.

Eſt ingrata ſenſatio cum debilitate juncta, quæ ad quietendum cogit virium reparandarum gratiâ. Procedere videtur ab infarctu muſculo- rum, ob ſanguinem in eorum vaſis minimis im- pactum eaque vaſa diſtendentem, interea dum ob defatigationem prægreſſam fluidum nerveum pe- muriâ laborat, aut ob aliam cauſam in artubus deficit, ut initio morborum accidit.

Hujus ſeptem ſpecies accenſet Galenus divi- ſione potius logica quàm medico-practicâ. Huc attinet Copos tonades, laſſitudo tenſiva, Copos

Fig. 1. Facsimile of the first page of Boissier de Sauvages's original Latin book (First part of the second tome) and of page 38 where he describes “Anxietas Tibiarum.”

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