

SEXUAL MEDICINE HISTORY

Sleep-Related Erections Throughout the Ages

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The occurrence of sleep-related erections (SREs) has been known since antiquity.

Aim. To highlight historical, theological, and sexual medicine-related aspects of SREs throughout the ages.

Methods. Review of old medical books on male sexual functioning and review of scientific medical and theological articles on SREs from about 1900 on.

Results. The cyclic character of SREs was first noted by German researchers in the forties of the 20th century. However, already before the beginning of the Christian era, one knew that men had erections and ejaculations during sleep. In the Middle Ages, SREs were generally considered to be rebellious manifestations of the male body, while it seemed to disobey its owner and showed up its perverted and sinful side. From the fifteenth to the end of the 17th century, severe erectile dysfunction (ED) was ground for divorce. The ecclesiastical court records show that if necessary, the members of the jury sat at the defendant's bedside at night to be able to judge any SREs occurring. Since the 17th century, SREs were considered to be part of masturbation, which could cause many ailments and diseases. Psychoanalyst Stekel acknowledged in 1920 that a morning erection, the last SRE, is a naturally occurring phenomenon in healthy men from infancy to old age. Today, some scientists assume that SREs protect the integrity of the penile cavernous bodies.

Conclusions. Throughout the ages, philosophers, theologians, physicians, members of ecclesial law courts, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, sexologists, physiologists, and urologists have shown interest in SREs. Obviously, the observations and testing of SREs have a long history, from antiquity to modern sleep labs, in men and in women, in newborns and old adults, by penis rings with sharp spikes to fancy strain gauge devices. Despite all these efforts, the mechanisms leading to SREs and its function are however not yet completely understood. **van Driel MF. Sleep-related erections throughout the ages. J Sex Med 2014;11:1867–1875.**

Key Words. Sleep-Related Erections; Historical and Theological Aspects; Nocturnal Penile Tumescence; Rapid Eye Movement Sleep

Introduction

Penile and clitoral erections occur in several contexts, some of which have nothing to do with sexuality, for example the nocturnal ones. There is no well-developed evolutionary theory or a proposed adaptive function of these sleep-related erections (SREs), but it is well-known that they are significantly related to rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and that they decline with age. During a normal night of sleep, humans usually have about four or five periods of REM sleep attended by

dreams and penile or clitoral erections. SRE is at its peak during puberty, constituting just over 30% of sleep in 13- to 15-year-old boys and decreasing to 20% in men between ages 60–69 [1–4]. This means that the duration and intensity of SREs is a function of age. Interestingly, individual peak T levels occur near the transitions from non-REM to REM sleep [5].

Long-term monitoring of erections, already in the late thirties of the 20th century, on nine 3- to 20-week-old completely undressed male infants with diapers spread out smoothly beneath their

buttocks, in a single large room, showed that when SREs occurred, “they frequently awakened the infant” [6]. In relation to this observation, it is interesting to realize that newborn babies spend about 16 hours each day sleeping, and about half of this is in REM sleep. So, one may expect long-lasting SREs, particularly while after birth, a 3-month lasting period of relatively high T levels begins, the so-called “mini-puberty.” Probably because of ethical reasons, this has never been investigated. In adults, T has a key role in the modulation of SREs, but the accurate T plasma level threshold remains to be established, while in hypogonadal men, SREs may persist within the normal ranges [7,8].

Earlier, SRE was widely known as nocturnal penile tumescence (NPT), an abbreviation introduced by the psychiatrist Ismet Karacan (1927–2009) who was one of the pioneers in monitoring nocturnal erections in a sleep laboratory. In the mid-1960s, he found that NPT was not per se accompanied by erotic dream content [9]. Other investigators confirmed that dream contents at SREs are rarely erotic [10–12]. By the work of Karacan, NPT became a widely accepted abbreviation, which is still used by some sexual medicine specialists and urologists, but in the interest of linguistic accuracy, the International Classification of Sleep Disorders advises the term SREs instead of NPT.

Nearly 10 years ago, sleep medicine experts extensively reviewed SREs with regard to clinical perspectives and neural mechanisms [13]. The aim of this article is to highlight historical, theological, and sexual medicine-related aspects of SREs.

SREs in Antiquity and Middle Ages

The occurrence of SREs has been known since antiquity. Plato (427–347 BC) maintained that “in males the nature of the genital organs is disobedient and self-willed, like a creature that is deaf to reason, and it attempts to dominate all because of its frenzied lusts.” [14] With this statement, the ancient Greek philosopher put forward an idea characteristic of medieval theologians: The penis possesses his own will and to keep him under control is a complex and skilful exercise in which not everybody will succeed. Some years ago, Dirk Schultheiss gave an example of the description of SREs out of the Roman period [15]. It concerned the poet Horace (65–8 BC) who described a situation when he was waiting in his rest room for a very nice young female servant, who did not reach

him; therefore, he wrote: “there I—what a stupid!—wait an untruthful girl till midnight: then I fall sound asleep with my penis completely erected, and my dreams stain my night-short and my supine belly with obscene images” [Satyrs, I, V, vv. 82–85].

Claudius Galenus (129–c.200/c.216), better known as Galen of Pergamon, was a prominent Greek-speaking Roman philosopher, surgeon, and personal physician of emperor Marcus Aurelius. He was the first to describe the bulbospongiosal and ischiocavernosus muscles. Galen considered dreams with their SREs as textbook examples of the category dreams that reflected an individual’s physical state: “Men full of sperm will imagine that they are having sexual intercourse.” [16,17] So, in his view, SREs and nocturnal ejaculations were simply the consequence of a males’ physical condition. He was also an “early believer” that sexual abstinence could cause madness.

As concerns the earlier Middle Ages, most of what is known about sexuality relies on John Cassian (c. 360–435) [18]. He was a prominent ascetic and prolific writer on monastic life active in the Middle East and southern Gaul and one of those responsible for bringing eastern hermetic-style monasticism into Western Europe. In his Institutes, he gives advice with regard to coping with morning erections [19]:

“Firstly, lest the jealous fiend through some dream defile the purity which was gained in the psalms and prayers of the night, angered by outchastity to which he is ever most opposed. Once we have obtained pardon for your ignorant transgressions, and forgiveness begged with tears in confession, he is determined to corrupt us if he finds a moment’s chance, and is most anxious to weaken or destroy our confidence when he sees us devoutly turning to God in purity of prayer. Thus he attempts during the short space of this hour after vigils to bring down those whom he failed to defeat all night long.”

So, for Christian monks, SREs and nocturnal ejaculations became the battlefield to preserve their purity. They blamed irresistible female demons, who tempted and tantalized them with their beautiful naked bodies, especially when they were asleep and vulnerable to “attacks.” They even tied metal crucifixes to their genitals before going to bed to combat these temptations. However, church father St. Augustine (354–430) sustained that in dreams, men were not responsible for their acts, even though they might feel sorry for what happened to them. He stated that “if the nocturnal

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