Epilepsy & Behavior 71 (2017) 104–107

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Epilepsy & Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/yebeh

Review

Traditional folk beliefs on epilepsy in Norway and Sweden

Mia Tuft [a,*], Karl O. Nakken [b], Kyrre Kverndokk [c]

[a] Neuropsychology Centre, Oslo, Norway
[b] National Center for Epilepsy, Division of Neuroscience, Oslo University Hospital, Norway
[c] Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion, University of Bergen, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 February 2017
Revised 13 March 2017
Accepted 17 March 2017
Available online 1 June 2017

Keywords:
Epilepsy
Folk beliefs
History

ABSTRACT

In Norway and Sweden, epilepsy has for many centuries been considered a strange and mysterious disease. The explanations of its causes have been many and imaginative. One being that epilepsy was caused by the hidden people inhabiting the woods and the mountains. To avoid the disease, these hidden people should not be annoyed.

One commonly used treatment principle was to try to place the disease back to the ground, or passing the diseased through a hole or an opening in the nature. Fresh blood from criminals was also considered to have strong antiepileptic properties.

In the Scandinavian countries, some of these folk beliefs have been very tenacious.

1. Introduction

Epilepsy is a disease that traditionally has been wrapped in magic beliefs. Throughout the world, these beliefs have taken many forms. The purpose of this article is to explore the traditional beliefs and folk medical practices regarding epilepsy in Norway and Sweden. These two countries have to be considered as one continuous area of tradition, as neighboring countries located on the Scandinavian Peninsula.

Academic medicine did not have any significance for everyday life in these countries before the second part of the 19th century. In 1750, Norway had for instance about ten trained physicians, and 50 years later there was less than one hundred [1]. Vernacular medical knowledge was mostly based on folk beliefs, and the folk medical practices of so-called wise men and women was a necessity at least until the end of the 19th century.

Conceptions, terming of seizures and vernacular treatment of epilepsy in the traditional Scandinavian agrarian society of the 18th, 19th and early 20th century are crucial for understanding how people lived their lives with epilepsy at that time. The empirical basis of this article is Norwegian and Swedish folklore, collected during late 19th and early 20th century [2–8]. It is for the most part based on a number of key publications on folk medicine and folk beliefs in Norway and Sweden in combination with literature search within a corpus of more than 100 printed collections of Norwegian folklore, published by Norwegian Folklore Society (Norsk Folkeminnelag).

2. Understanding of diseases in the ancient agrarian society

Traditional folk medicine was not a medical system, but rather a quite diverse set of beliefs and practices. It is therefore not always an obvious relation between causes and consequences. Yet, there are some common underlying principles.

In the agrarian society it was considered that magic powers such as revenants and supernatural beings inhabited the ground, the woods, the lakes and the rivers. Illness was generally considered to be something quite concrete, as a physical entity or even a projectile sent out by supernatural powers or by people performing black magic [1,9]. Even some animals were believed to cause illness, such as snakes, frogs and birds. These animals were regarded to be closely related to supernatural beings [10].

The Scandinavian society of the 18th and 19th century was pervaded by the all-embracing awareness of how the almighty God had the power to protect and punish. Hence, diseases were also understood as divine punishments or simply determined by God's providence. Piety could protect from the harm of God, while a combination of precautious behavior and various kinds of magical practices were used to protect against the supernatural powers, revenants or black magic. Such precisions were executed to protect against illnesses in general, and epilepsy was no exception.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: miatuft@neuropsychology.no (M. Tuft).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.yebeh.2017.03.032
1525-5050/

The Lutheran church considered folk beliefs as superstition — as survivals from paganism and medieval Christianity. Yet, traditional folk beliefs were in fact intertwined with vernacular Christianity and were vital until the beginning of the 20th century [11,12].

3. Folk beliefs about what was causing epilepsy

3.1. The hidden people

There is a rich tradition in both Sweden and Norway on how to respect the hidden people ("hulder", from huld = hidden) — the supernatural beings inhabiting the woods and the mountains [13]. They should not be annoyed; otherwise they could cause diseases among humans as well as on the livestock.

In Nordland, in the northern part of Norway, it was told that a woman once observed a "hulder" going close to her baby in the cradle. After that incident, the child got epilepsy. In Elverum, located east in Norway, it was told that a boy got epilepsy after having shouted at a "hulder". Soon after, a big black dog frightened him. Since then he had lifelong epilepsy [14].

It was a common belief that the life of hidden people was mirroring human life. They had farms, cattle and even churches hidden under ground. One way to respect them was avoiding pouring hot water on the ground [13]. In Slätthög in Sweden, it was a conception that the newborn child's bathwater should not be thrown straight out on the ground. Then the hidden people later would take revenge by giving the child epilepsy [10].

It was also crucial to avoid raising farm houses or summer mountain farms on top of a hidden farm. Yet, there are numerous legends on how people accidently did just that [13]. One such legend from Valdres, a mountain valley in Norway, tells how a man and his wife put up a cow-shed on top of a hidden farm, and as a punishment the hidden people put epilepsy and mental diseases on their children [14].

3.2. Special precautions during pregnancy

Pregnant women were generally considered especially vulnerable to diseases caused by supernatural powers [2]. They were themselves responsible for protecting their unborn child. Thus, there was a complicated set of protective advices and behavioral restrictions during pregnancy.

From different areas in Sweden, stories were told about pregnant women who had stepped over fences that had fallen down, and as a result, they gave birth to children with epilepsy. This imaginary was drawing upon the magical principle of similarity [13]. Like the fallen fence, the child got the falling sickness.

The same principle was the basis for several related beliefs. In Norway, as well as in Sweden, it was well known that a pregnant woman should avoid seeing someone cutting down a woven piece of cloth. If she saw someone falling, she should be the first helping the person up again, and she should be very careful not to fall herself or to drop objects on the floor [3,10,14].

Moreover, it was generally believed that the unborn child could get epilepsy if the pregnant woman had watched living creatures die, animals as well as humans. Hence, she should not watch animals being slaughtered or even see blood on the ground after executions. Watching someone carrying an ax or to look at an ax that was fastened into a chopping block was also considered hazardous [4,10,13]. Pregnant women should also stay away from cemeteries; it was believed that if an old coffin collapsed under her feet, her child would get epilepsy [5,10,14].

Fright was considered a cause of epilepsy, not only in Scandinavia but also in other parts of Europe. If the woman had a frightening experience during pregnancy, the child had an increased risk of developing seizures [14].

Pregnant women should always dress properly. In Sweden, a story was told about a woman who walked to the barn without wearing an apron, and her child later got epilepsy [10]. However, the same happened to a woman who wore *two* aprons; she met a person with epilepsy on her way, and the unborn child was contaminated [3].

3.3. Birds could cause epilepsy

The sight of a number of different birds could, according to Norwegian folk beliefs, cause epilepsy. In Evanger in western Norway, it was believed that "seeing the woodcock dance on its beak" could cause the disease. The same could happen to those who shot a Siberian jay. In the neighboring parish, Eksingedal, it was said that those who saw the raven brood her eggs, would develop epilepsy. Likewise, in Romsdal, northwest in Norway, it was told that those who destroyed the eggs of the ring ouzels or caused the bird any harm would be struck by the disease [14]. Even eiderdown could cause epilepsy, since it had fallen from the eider duck. To avoid epilepsy, one should not use eiderdown in the bedding [15].

4. Many seizure terms

As in English, the term "falling sickness" (Norwegian: fall, fallesyke, brottfall, brottfallssott, nedfallssott) was the dominating term in both Norwegian tradition and Swedish tradition. Another term directly referring to the seizures was "cramp" (Norwegian: krampe) [10,14]. The term "the bad disease" (Norwegian: den slemme syke) [16] was commonly used in Denmark [14]. A term referring to the magic view of the traditional agrarian society was "fang", best translated as "to be captured — or seized". The term was in use south in Norway and in parts of Denmark, and refers to the belief that the disease was literary caused by the power of a supernatural being, and the convulsions reflected the person's struggle to get free [14,17]. This has an interesting parallel in the 20th century English author Margiad Evans' self-experience of almost being seized by an external force [18].

The term "gifted" (Norwegian: begaving) was in use in the western part of Norway [19]. The term has Dutch origin [12] and referred to the disease as a gift from God [19]. In fact, one of the most well-known clairvoyants in 19th century Norway, Knut Rasmussen Nordgarden (1792–1876), better known as "Wise-Knut", had epilepsy. The rich oral tradition about him relates his gifts and prophesies to the disease [20,21]. The connection between clairvoyants and epilepsy may have a parallel in a variety of shamanic practices, documented in different cultural contexts around the world [22].

In Norway, epileptic seizures have also been termed after the patients' animal-like ictal sounds, such as "cowfall", "pigfall" and "goatfall". These terms are at the same time referring to animals the mother of the child had seen being slaughtered during the pregnancy [10,14]. Along the southern shore of Norway, it was even told that if a pregnant woman by accident got to observe a fish being killed, the child could get "fishfall", i.e. seizures resembling a fish in death throes [6].

5. Treatment and protective remedies

5.1. Forcing the hidden people to take back the disease

Reading from the Scripture was considered a protection from the hidden people. A legend from Romsdal, Norway, tells about a girl with epilepsy who often was troubled by a male "hulder" who wanted to take her as a wife. Then she brought a vicar to the place she used to encounter him. When they arrived, she had a seizure and was unable to move. The vicar made her read The Lord's Prayer, and when she came to "And lead us not into temptation", the story tells, she became healthy and seizure free [10]. However, the legend does not reflect a clerical