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History of Neurology

Louis Delasiauve (1804–1893), an alienist at the dawn of epileptology and pediatric psychiatry

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INFO ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to honor the memory of the alienist Louis Delasiauve (1804–1893). His classification of the different types of epilepsy based on clinical symptoms is still relevant today and made him a precursor of contemporary epileptology. In 1851, Delasiauve clinically and etiologically isolated ‘acute mental confusion’ (acute confusional state) from all other forms of dementia. Never deviating from his republican and progressive ideals, he devoted himself throughout the 19th century to treating those insane asylum patients who received the poorest care: epileptics and children with intellectual disabilities. Studying functional cognitive disability as well as mental disability secondary to congenital malformations, Delasiauve developed a novel specific form of pedagogy to deal with delays in cognitive development. This made him one of the initiators of institutional pediatric psychiatry. His ideas would be carried forward by his favorite student, Désiré-Magloire Bourneville (1840–1909). Committed to social welfare, Delasiauve worked relentlessly to improve access to healthcare for the least fortunate throughout France. As a passionate supporter of universal, free and secular education, he participated in a major movement away from religious establishments that involved opening a public school in every French canton.

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Louis Jean-François Delasiauve (1804–1893) (Fig. 1) who, in his first publications, preferred ‘de Lasiauve’, was both a neurologist and an alienist. Along with Jules Baillarger (1809–1890), Louis-Florentin Calmeil (1798–1895), Francisque Lélut (1804–1877), Jacques Moreau de Tours (1804–1884) and others, Delasiauve served as a link in the mid-19th century between the period of initiators, such as Philippe Pinel (1745–1826) and Jean-Etienne Esquirol (1772–1840), and that of his students Désiré-Magloire Bourneville (1840–1909) and Jules Christian (1840–1907). After the revolution in Paris in 1848, Delasiauve became involved in politics as a “medical and radical candidate and organizer” in the Eure department (Normandy). Delasiauve presented his beliefs to electors in terms of his origins and his personality: “With my modest background

among the people, aware of their needs, their efforts and their difficulties, I have asked on their behalf, when so many powerful voices remain silent, for justice, clarity, rehabilitation and intelligence; I have completed difficult studies to prove myself worthy of this glorious vocation, and I am prepared to defend the rights and interests of the people [...]” [1]. He was elected to the office of parliamentary deputy.

After Delasiauve was born on 14 October 1804 in the city of Garennes in the Eure, his parents, modest shopkeepers, moved to the neighbouring city of Ivry-la-Bataille, where he spent his childhood, before leaving to pursue his secondary studies in Evreux. During his medical studies in Paris, he took particular interest in his general pathology classes with Jean-Bruno Cayol (1788–1856) and the introductory class on mental

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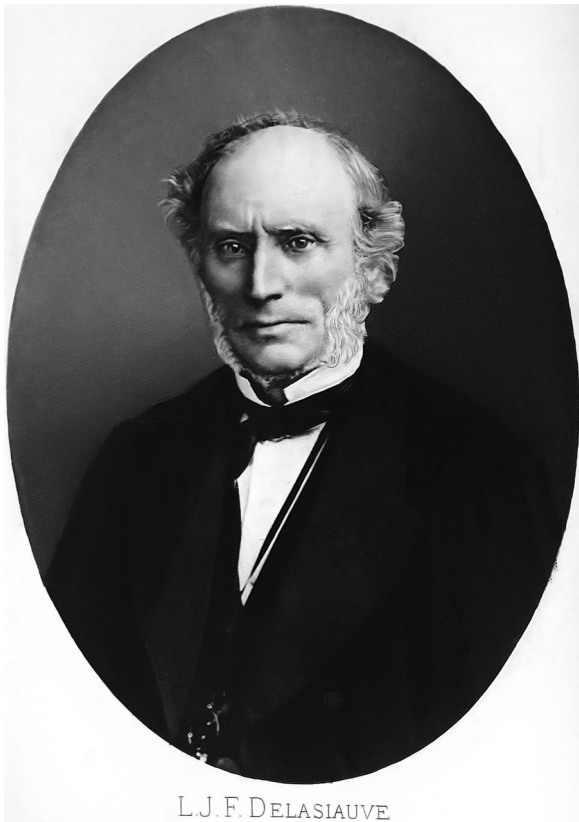


Fig. 1 – Louis Delasiauve (1804–1893) (BIU Santé, Paris, public domain).

diseases that Guillaume Ferrus (1784–1861) taught at Hospice de Bicêtre. The defence of his thesis [2], planned for 28 July 1830, was postponed due to the Second French Revolution, which lasted three days and was known as ‘Les Trois Glorieuses’. Once the ‘King of France’ had been replaced by a ‘King of the French’, Delasiauve defended his thesis with Cayol presiding over the jury. He discussed such concepts as ‘vital force’, the ‘state of health’ and the ‘nature of disease’. He stressed the primary importance of clinical medicine: “The medical arts will reach a very high level once the value of each diagnostic element has been understood and the transition of cause to effect can be followed to reveal the innermost nature of disease.” His medical degree in hand, he returned to Ivry-la-Bataille to practice as a rural physician. “Dedicated and affable, he rapidly attracted a large clientele and became known throughout the region” [3]. Just after establishing his practice, in 1831, he became one of the founding members of the Société phrénologique de Paris, which brought those with progressive and anticlerical ideas into the sphere of influence of Victor Cousin (1792–1867), a philosopher and professor at La Sorbonne.

In 1833, the Eure prefect Antoine Passy (1792–1873) appointed Delasiauve a member of the canton’s delegation on public instruction, which had been set up to comply with the Law of 28 June 1833, known as the ‘loi Guizot’. According to René Sémelaigne (1855–1934), “he took his mission seriously and developed a passionate and lasting interest in pedagogy and instruction” [4]. This interest would play a key role in his future activities. By 1832, he was already a member of the

Société Libre d’Agriculture, Sciences, Arts et Belles-Lettres for the Eure department. His first publications appeared in the society’s bulletin: ‘Considérations théoriques sur l’aliénation mentale’ was presented for debate in 1841 [5]; ‘Considérations sur l’extase’ in 1842 [6]; and ‘Essai de classification des maladies mentales’ in 1843 [7]. His former teacher, Cayol, sought his collaboration for *La Revue Médicale Française et Étrangère* [8]. He then worked on *L’Expérience, Journal de médecine et de chirurgie* [9], directed by Jean-Eugène Dezeimeris (1799–1851) and Émile Littré (1801–1881). In May 1839, his editorial activities led him to definitively leave Normandy for Paris, where he became friends with Laurent Jessé Bayle (1799–1858) and Claude-Etienne Bourdin (1815–1886).

In 1840, the first competitive exam for alienists to staff asylums in and around Paris led to the appointment of Baillarger, Moreau de Tours, Ulysse Trélat (1795–1879) and Théophile Archambault (1806–1863); Delasiauve was appointed after the second exam in 1843. He began as assistant to François Leuret (1797–1851) at Bicêtre. When Leuret died, Delasiauve took over half of his department, becoming responsible for epileptics and “mentally retarded children”. According to Bourneville, “He was pleased, as for many years he had taken such an active interest in education. This led to his fine ‘Traité de l’épilepsie’ (1854) and his remarkable report, ‘Des principes qui doivent présider à l’éducation des idiots’”.

Delasiauve was interested in new concepts and ideologies, as evidenced by his various activities. A founding member of the Société Médico-Psychologique in 1852, he was also actively involved in the work published in *Les Annales médico-psychologiques* [10]. Jules Falret (1824–1902) described the “exuberant voice, the love of discussion and the vigor in defending his ideas that characterized him most completely” [11]. In 1859, Delasiauve was one of the 19 founding members of the Société d’Anthropologie.

In 1861, Delasiauve founded *Le Journal de Médecine Mentale* [12], one of the first journals to publish exclusively the work of alienists. “We wanted to provide a mental education, as it were, to physicians outside the alienist’s field and to magistrates, students, educators and the general public” [13]. Antoine Ritti (1844–1920) had high praise for Delasiauve and his journal: “It contains a long series of his articles, which comprise a complete treatise of mental pathology, based on elements of normal psychology. Even approached with care and impartiality, this magisterial work surprises the reader with the sheer quantity of ideas, some of them highly original, which Mr Delasiauve has woven into articles written, to some extent, on a day-by-day basis” [14]. After the Franco-Prussian War put a definitive end to his journal, Delasiauve sent articles to *Le Progrès Médical*, directed and edited by his favorite student, Bourneville. He also sent articles to his colleague Charcot’s *Archives de Neurologie*. It is surprising that, although they shared many politico-religious ideas, Charcot apparently did not spend much time with Delasiauve beyond what was required of physicians practising at the same hospital. Their age difference might explain this, or the fact that Charcot was interested in neurology, whereas Delasiauve was more interested in psychiatry, especially child psychiatry.

In October 1862, Georges Clémenceau (1841–1929), who was later the French Prime Minister during World War I, was his

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