APHASIA AND KINDRED DISORDERS OF SPEECH

HENRY HEAD
INTRODUCTION

Before Henry Head, the clinical examination of aphasia patients had been haphazard. Realizing the dearth of information about this disorder, Head introduced a battery of tests which marked a cornerstone in aphasiology, and in correlating this with work done previously by Hughlings Jackson, gained a new perspective of the affliction. His conclusions and observations were contained in his Aphasia and Kindred Disorders of Speech, published in 1926.

In commenting on his purpose for the two-volume work, Head stated, "I have attempted to blaze a track through the jungle, but make no pretence at having reached the end of the journey. I can only hope that some ardent and adventurous spirit may follow in my path and find that my labours have helped him to the solution of the profoundly interesting and difficult problems of disorders of speech."
HENRY HEAD*

Henry Head was born on August 4, 1861, at 6 Park Road, Stoke Newington. His father was Henry Head, an insurance broker of Lloyds, third son of Jeremiah Head, late Mayor of Ipswich, and Mary Howard his wife. His mother, Hester, was the daughter of Richard Beck whose wife, Rachel, was the daughter of Samuel Lucas of Hitchin. Richard Beck was the partner of his uncle J.J. Lister in a wine business in Tokenhouse Yard, London. This Mr. Lister was the father of Lord Lister who was thus Henry Head's cousin. Through his mother he was also related to E.V. Lucas the author. Both Head's parents came of Quaker stock and, as he said, "were the centre of a multitude of friends and relations." Later they moved to Stamford Hill, to a house which William Morris decorated for them, and Henry, after attending two day-schools, went as a weekly boarder to the Friends' School, Grove House, Tottenham. Several of his contemporaries there became distinguished. There he came under the influence of a master called Ashford, whom he described as "one of the best teachers of natural science I have ever encountered. To this man," he said, "I owe the fact that I was firmly grounded in the elements of natural science at an age when boys at an ordinary school in my day were ignorant of the very existence of the subject." When he was thirteen he went on to Charterhouse, which had recently moved from London to Godalming, and there again he was fortunate in coming under the influence of a science master, W.H.V. Poole, who clearly realized the exceptional abilities of his pupil, for he taught him not only biology, but the elements of physiology, and gave him private tuition in dissection and cutting microscopic sections at his house.

From Charterhouse Head went to Trinity College, Cambridge, but instead of staying at Charterhouse for the last

summer term he spent some months in Germany at Halle, where he studied physiology and histology at the University and devoted some time each day to learning German. In October he went up to Cambridge where his contemporaries and friends included a number of men destined to become distinguished, d'Arcy Thompson, W.R. Sorley, A.N. Whitehead, William Bateson and A.G. Shipley amongst them. Michael Foster was professor of physiology, and Langley and Gaskell were lecturing.

Head said once that he could not remember the time when he did not wish to make medicine his career in life, and he mentions in this connexion the influence of his mother's cousin, Marcus Becs, who had worked as assistant to Joseph Tucker at Glasgow. He describes how, when he was eight years old, his family was involved in an epidemic of scarlet fever. When Henry had recovered he was taken for a few days to stay with the family doctor, Mr. Brett, and one morning at breakfast startled his family by pouring a little tea into a teaspoon, and setting it over a spirit lamp, carefully inspecting the result, as he had seen Mr. Brett do often during his own illness, to see if he could detect albumin in the urine.

On coming down from Cambridge, after getting a first class in both parts of the Natural Science Tripos, he decided to go abroad again. Dissatisfied with some laboratories he visited in Germany, he decided to visit Hering at Prague. He was immediately impressed by Hering and the facilities available, and Hering seems to have been impressed with Head, for he once invited him to stay and work with him. There Head carried out his work on the physiology of respiration, and listened to Hering's account of his own researches into colour vision.

After two years in Prague Head went back to Cambridge to complete his courses in anatomy and physiology, and then joined University College Hospital, London, where he qualified in 1890. There he was house physician, and he also worked at the National Hospital, Queen Square, under Dr. Thomas Buzzard. Later he was house physician at the Victoria Park Hospital for Diseases of the Chest, and it is probable that he was attracted to that hospital by his interest in the physiology of respiration. At any rate it is possible from his early writing to trace in some detail the development of what was to be his main interest in neurology. His Cambridge M.D. thesis, "On disturbances of sensation with especial reference to the pain of visceral disease," subsequently published in Brain (Head, 1893) was, as he acknowledged, based upon patients seen at University College Hospital and the National Hospital. It begins with these words:

Several years ago I was led to examine the positions occupied by pain in disorders of the stomach and I soon came to the conclusion that the usual description was incomplete in several respects. . . . I then began to investigate the distribution of herpes zoster in the hope that a skin lesion which was notoriously of nervous origin might throw some light on the meaning and significance of the tender areas in visceral disease. . . . I next attempted to determine to what level of the nervous system these areas belonged, with the help of cases in which gross organic lesions were present. . . . This opened up the whole question of sensation in its various forms, but in this paper I shall not do more than touch upon the relations between the distribution of the sensations of pain, of heat, of cold and of touch.

His next communication on the subject of pain produced by visceral disease (Head, 1894) was based upon patients seen at the Victoria Park Hospital. Here we find him covering a wide field of medicine, and devoting considerable attention to diseases of the heart and lungs. He also studied the mental changes associated with visceral disease and made this the subject of his Goulstonian Lectures for 1901 (Head, 1901). Thus he began his medical career as a general physician with a special training in physiology, and it was visceral disease which aroused his interest in pain, and his study of pain which led him into the broader field of the neurological basis of sensation in general. And a general physician he remained to the end of his professional life.

In 1896 Head was appointed medical registrar to the London Hospital, and within four months elected assistant physician. There is a verbatim report of one of his rounds at the London Hospital in 1900. The first patient he showed had mitral stenosis, adherent pericardium and heart failure. Nearly twenty years later Dr. Donald Hunter recorded him as teaching on the difference between bronchial and cardiac asthma.

This leads me to talk of Henry Head as a teacher. Some
men find teaching difficult; others are born teachers; they feel impelled to impart information to others. Head was one of those. When he was only twenty-one we find him addressing the Stoke Newington Mutual Instruction Society at the Friends' Meeting House, Park Street, on the fertilization of plants. His devotion to teaching is well illustrated by an account of him which was given by Professor H.M. Turnbull, who wrote:

I had the good fortune when first going to the hospital to meet daily in the mornings on the steam engine underground railway Dr. Henry Head. He told me to buy Gee's little book on percussion, and kindly taught me throughout our journeys about physical signs, much to the annoyance of our fellow travellers; indeed in his characteristic keenness he spoke so loudly that as we walked to the hospital from St. Mary's station people on the other side of the wide Whitechapel Road would turn to look at us. I was greatly interested in the central nervous system when learning physiology and anatomy, and so I enjoyed greatly my three months as a clerk to him, his sessions in the out-patient department, and his wonderful demonstrations on clinical evenings . . . He devoted a great deal of time to teaching. In his rounds of the wards his clerks read the histories and examinations they had written, and he criticized even the English. He did not confine himself to nervous diseases, but took more pains than any other physician for whom I clerked to teach us physical signs and how to examine patients of all kinds. He was a little too anxious to get exactly correct results when demonstrating to students; thus when he was mapping out areas of anaesthesia or hyperaesthesia the cotton wool, pin, etc., would pass more slowly, and the 'say when' would become a little more rapid and insistent, as the correct boundary was approached.

His ward rounds and demonstrations were crowded, postgraduates and students alike being attracted by his gift of exposition, enthusiasm, and sense of the dramatic. He would illustrate his lectures by himself reproducing the involuntary movements or postures produced by nervous disease, and "Henry Head doing gaits" was a perennial attraction. As Sherrington (1940) characteristically put it: "As a teacher he had himself a wide and devoted following. In his lecturing some slight mannerisms endeared themselves to his audience as very symbols of him.

After the First World War, when the establishment of medical professional units was being considered, it was suggested that Head might become the first professor of medicine at the London Hospital. Indeed the proposal got as far as the preparation by him of a memorandum on the constitution of such a unit, which in his view needed 100 beds and three whole-time assistants. But it was not to be. It would have been an exciting experiment, for Head had long held distinctive views of his own on medical education. Nearly twenty years previously he had written in his diary: "Medical education in England suffers from the fact that the great hospitals are manned by practitioners of medicine who sometimes teach, instead of by professors of that science who occasionally practise."

Until the First World War the London Hospital was the only hospital at which Head was on the staff. Then the Empire Hospital for Officers was set up in Vincent Square, where officers suffering from wounds involving the nervous system were concentrated. Head was a civilian consultant and there he was joined by George Riddoch, who had recently come down from Aberdeen to take a resident post at the West End Hospital for Nervous Diseases and became officer-in-charge. Head took into partnership in research this able young man, and one of the results was the series of papers on the effects of gross injuries of the spinal cord. This work was perhaps of less theoretical novelty than his earlier researches on sensation, but it was of great practical importance, since it laid the foundations of the management of traumatic paraplegia, of which Riddoch was to be an apostle in the Second World War, and which undoubtedly saved many lives, and did much to maintain the health of the survivors.

In 1904, when he was forty-two, Head married Ruth Mayhew, daughter of Anthony Mayhew, Chaplain of Wadham College, Oxford. She was headmistress of Brighton High School for Girls, and a fit companion for him in intelligence and breadth of interest. They had no children, but Ruth Head once said that this had been more than compensated for by the part he had played in her life. They had known each other for seven years before they married, and, being separated by their work, they started a joint diary and commonplace book.
Each had a volume, which they exchanged from time to
time, so that they could comment on each other’s experi-
ences, thoughts and reading. Ruth Head herself wrote sev-
eral books, including two novels, and compiled an an-
thology of Thomas Hardy’s writings, to which Henry
wrote an introduction. As Sir Gordon Holmes wrote in his
Royal Society obituary,

she shared his interests, stimulated his enthusiasm, criticized
his writings and relieved him of many of the petty worries of
life. In his later years she was his constant companion, and
her philosophical outlook, her joy in life and her encourag-
ment helped him to bear an illness which otherwise would
have been an intolerable fate to one of his active mind and
body.

Ruth Head died a year before her husband.

We cannot think of Henry Head only as a doctor. Like
Whitman he might have said: “I am large, I contain mul-
titudes.” And, again like Whitman: “When I give, I give my-
self.” His interests were wide, and embraced art, literature,
the stage, music, and, indeed, all aspects of human nature.
A poet himself, he published The Destroyers, a book of very
personal verse, and, had he not adopted medicine as a
profession, he might well have been equally distinguished as
a writer. He reminds one of what Boswell and Johnson said
about Burke.

Boswell: Mr. Burke has a constant stream of conversation.
Johnson: Yes, Sir; if a man were to go by chance at the same
time with Burke under a shed to shun a shower, he would
say—“this is an extraordinary man.”

It was natural that one with so many gifts, and so ready
to give, should attract a circle of gifted people. He was the
friend and doctor of the poet W.E. Henley, and during and
after the First World War counted among his friends some of
the younger Georgian poets, among them Siegfried Sassoon,
Robert Graves, and Robert Nichols. To them, as to many
young people in many walks of life, he was a kind of uni-
versal uncle, Uncle Harry. Let me quote the impression he
made upon one of them. Robert Nichols wrote about him in
The Times:

Sir Henry possessed the fullest as well as the wisest mind I
have ever known. It was no unusual thing to hear him in the

course of one evening discourse on topics so various as:
the influence of reasoning upon Goethe and Mozart, types of
apprehension in listeners to symphonic music, sensations while
looping the loop (he was over sixty when he did so), the paint-
ing of Guardi, “co-ordination” in a star golfer, Ninon de
Lenclos, Conrad as a narrator (Sir Henry was far the ablest
literary critic I have ever known), religious ecstasy, the rela-
tion of art and science, the social customs of Melanesia. On
each of such topics he not only appeared to have more infor-
mation than anybody in the room, but spoke after a more il-
iluminating fashion, for, like Leonardo (in whom he was an
authority) he had a supreme eye for the significant. Nor did he
resemble Leonardo in mind only. He had Leonardo’s lofty
human compassion, humility, patience, and profound serenity
of spirit.

With the first symptoms of parkinsonism Head retired
from the London Hospital in 1919, and shortly afterwards,
at the suggestion of Siegfried Sassoon, went to live in Dorset
as the neighbour of Thomas Hardy at Max Gate. This new
friendship was a consolation to both of them, but Hardy had
not long to live, and soon after his death the Heads moved to
Hartley Court, near Reading, to be nearer London. Harvey
Cushing (Fulton, 1946) describes in detail a visit he paid to
him there. The last time I saw Henry Head was a few months
before he died. He was seventy-eight, and for many years
had been quite immobilized by his parkinsonism, and had
great difficulty in speaking. But his mind was still alert, and
he was eager to know what was happening in neurology. He
talked about his own disabilities, and the physical obstacle
they put in the way of speech, the part played by the auditor
in speech, the body-image, and sensory projection. He
pointed out that a walking-stick becomes temporarily part of
one’s body-image, so that when one touches the ground with
its tip, the resulting sensations, though felt in the hand, are
projected to the end of the stick. “Loze,” he said, “re-
marked that a woman could project to the end of the feather
in her hat,” and added that “a well-made dental plate is part
of one’s body, but if you get a pip under it, it becomes a for-
eign body.”

So one hundred years after he was born we recall this vivid
personality. Apart from his work on sensation and speech,
his concepts of the schema and vigilance were far ahead of
his time, the latter an anticipation of much recent work on
the physiology of attention. He had many ideas: he bubbled
over with them, and perhaps he was sometimes too ready to
convince himself of their truth. But no original thinker has
lacked critics ready to point that out. The progress of science
depends upon the ability to ride with a foot on each of two
horses, one named Fact and the other Hypothesis, and the
problem always is to keep them running level. Head contrib-
uted to neurology new facts and new ideas. More important
perhaps than either was his vitalizing influence upon those
with whom he worked, those he taught, and those he is still
teaching, and will continue to teach.

REFERENCES
— (1894). Brain, 17, 231.
— (1901). Brain, 24, 345.