The FOUNDERS of NEUROLOGY

Second Edition

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References


HENRY HEAD (1861–1940)

HENRY HEAD came of an old Quaker family of Stamford Hill in England. In 1880 he was elected to a scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, where, with Langley and Sherrington, he was strongly influenced by the physiologists Gaskell and Michael Foster. After graduating B.A. with honors in natural science he spent two years in the German University of Prague and the University of Halle. He is reputed to have introduced association football to Prague where it has ever since been a popular national pastime.

Head's first paper was on the action potential of nerve. Next, from Hering's laboratory in Halle in 1889, he published a masterly treatise on the respiratory effects of the vagus nerve. Following study in University College Hospital, London, he graduated in
Portrait, courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.
1892. His thesis for the M.D., *On disturbance of sensation, with special reference to the pain of visceral disease*, was of outstanding merit. At the instigation of Hitzig, Head's studies in this field were brought out as a book in German.

Referral of pain from deep structures led him to study herpes zoster; from this his investigation of the dermatomes naturally evolved. It was typical of his enthusiasm that he lived in a mental hospital for two years in order to obtain firsthand information on the herpes that was then common in paralytics. Foerster called attention to the remarkable accuracy of Head's observations when compared with the method of section of nerve roots. In 1898 Head was elected assistant physician to the London Hospital and was occupied in hospital and private practice to the time of his retirement in 1925.

Following his study on dermatomes, Head's investigations were devoted almost wholly to the sensory system, where he brought order out of chaos at every level by his vivid thought and refined clinical method. In 1908, with Rivers' assistance, he made many observations on himself after sectioning the superficial ramus of his own radial nerve. He undertook this auto-experiment because of his annoyance when patients became weary after an hour's testing of a restricted skin area. Two years before beginning the experiment, he further states in the account of it, he gave up smoking and abstained from alcohol, except on holidays.

Pre-eminent was his paper with Gordon Holmes in 1911 on sensory disturbances from cerebral lesions. Collected papers on sensation appeared in 1920. His postulate of two separate sensory systems—protopathic and epicritic—to explain the different susceptibilities of sensation, was severely criticized, and for many years was considered disproven. Recent recording from single sensory neurones has reaffirmed much in Head's separation of highly differentiated sensations from other types. Head did indeed provide the first rational explanation of the nature of sensory dissociation. The clinical facts which he and his collaborators established remain the basis for most clinical investigations of sensation today; in order to realize the magnitude of his contribution one has only to review the knowledge of sensory disorders before Head's investi-
gations. His extensive study of spinal reflex functions also brought new light and abundant stimulus to that problem. No less monumental was his contribution to aphasia. Here his originality brought new definition to the more complex aspects of these disorders. Describing "semantic aphasia," he provided a link between the linguistic and the intellectual aspects of speech forecast by Pierre Marie. The full implications of this work are even yet not generally recognized. Head's remaining writings include a volume of attractive verse.

Head was editor of Brain from 1910 to 1925, and the honor of knighthood was conferred on him in 1927. He became fluent in German and French, to the point of confusing the customs officials as to his nationality. A man of great patience, humility, and profound learning, he was fated to endure, for the last twenty years of his life, the prolonged physical discomfort and incapacity brought about by paralysis agitans. Even in this period his lively mind and indomitable enthusiasm immensely stimulated the fortunate few who were privileged to enjoy his conversation.

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References

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