

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AUTISM

Presented to the Bristol Medico-Historical Society March 2009

Peter Carpenter

Autism was first described as a specific syndrome by Leo Kanner in 1943. He was a Austrian-Hungarian, who moved to the States where he helped create the specialty of Child Psychiatry, writing the first English textbook on Child Psychiatry in 1935. Both Kanner and his father have themselves been said to have had many features of an Autism condition.



Leo Kanner, who first described 'Infantile Autism'

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

In his article ‘Autistic disturbances of affective contact.’ Kanner wrote:

“Since 1938 there has come to our attention a number of children whose condition differs so markedly and uniquely from anything reported so far”

He described eleven very different children with “infantile autism” and said it was different from schizophrenia, though similar with autistic aloneness and inability to develop relationships, but the speech was abnormal in a different way; there was an obsessive desire for sameness; but a good rote memory and normal physical appearance. In his article he described some people who were clearly of normal intelligence. The term Autism came from Bleuler who invented the term ‘Schizophrenia’ in 1905 and presumed this to have the four core aspects of altered Affect, Autism, Ambivalence and loosened Association of thought - the famous four ‘A’s’. Autism as a syndrome was not separately identified in the international classifications until 1977 so prior to this most clinicians called it Childhood Schizophrenia as Autism only appeared in classifications as part of the description of Schizophrenia. So Autism was seen as a mental illness. I have at least one patient with Autism who was given ECT as a child for their childhood schizophrenia, to no effect.

The other famous name of Autism is Hans Asperger who was the Professor of Paediatrics in Vienna during the war. He too has been described as being fairly autistic. In 1944 he published a paper in German on four children with “autistic psychopathy in childhood.” He described a very able group.

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

His paper was not translated until 1991, but before this his name was given to those of normal intelligence when in 1981 Lorna Wing wrote a paper entitled “Asperger syndrome: a clinical account.” She later explained that she wrote it as most clinicians associated Autism with people with profound mental handicap, and she wanted to highlight that a group existed who were of normal intelligence. She certainly succeeded in England, where Asperger syndrome came to be preferred to ‘Autism’ by many with the condition. However in the States, where she is a less influential author, people with Asperger syndrome tend to say they have ‘high functioning autism.’ Asperger’s paper was first translated and published in English in 1991.

Michael Rutter with Kolvin did a series of studies in the 1960s on Autism its natural history and demonstrated that autism was very separate to schizophrenia. ICD9 first used the category of Childhood Autism in 1977. In England in the 1970’s the Camberwell studies of Lorna Wing and Judith Gould suggested that there was a core triad of impairments in autism of social interaction; social communication and social imagination. This was modified in the new classification systems to be impaired social interaction, impaired social communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviours or interests. Autism came to be recognised as a neuro-developmental learning difficulty, in other words a disorder with a neurological origin that starts in early development and leads to profound changes in some psychological processes. More modern studies demonstrated that there was a loss of

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

connectivity between neurons within the brain, justifying my simple description that autism is due to autistic brain cells. Since its first discovery, there's been a vast rise in the numbers of people identified as having Autism or Asperger's (or now an Autism Spectrum Disorder) so now it is estimated to be 1% of the population. I do not think that this is best explained by a genuine increase in the number of people with autism. Undoubtedly autism is seen as a more socially acceptable condition to have than many others and a lot of people who previously were simply categorized as mentally handicapped or learning disabled are now being classified as primarily autistic. In addition there has been an educational advantage to being labelled autistic with extra funding being given for education of a person so labeled, particularly in the United States; as a result many parents have sought the diagnosis for their child to get the education, giving rapid rises of children with the diagnosis. In addition there has clearly been a creep of diagnosis with milder and milder cases now being identified as autistic. When I started in the field nobody thought that you could have autism and be married whereas now it is well accepted. It is telling that in the 1990 it was stated that a quarter of people with autism had normal or higher intelligence but in 2009 it was estimated that 90% of people with autism were of normal or higher intelligence. At present few women are diagnosed with Autism, but I expect the criteria to be modified for women so that more are diagnosed, leading to another increase in the incidence.

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

Did Autism exist before Kanner?

It is true that the early Georgian psychiatrists do not mention cases of autism in their publications, but they do not mention almost any chronic cases, in part as their publications were to advertise their ability to cure people and not their failures. Before the 1940s autism would be seen as a form of idiocy. Prior to the 1840s Idiocy attracted little medical interest as it was seen as incurable and had a high childhood death rate. Autism is only likely to come into detailed records for other reasons, usually legal ones. One case that has been written about is that of Hugh Blair of Borgue, who was a Scottish landowner who in 1747 at the age of 39 had the validity of his marriage challenged in court. It was claimed he was an idiot though he functioned as a landowner. As a result the court heard a very detailed account of Hugh Blair who is described as being tactless; having an abnormal gaze; as echolalic, obsessive and a collector of feathers and sticks who had mannerisms and lacked commonsense. He sounds remarkably autistic. Another case is probably that of Victor “The wild boy of Aveyron.” He was found naked in the woods in 1798 at about age 12 and the famous teacher of the deaf and blind, Jean Itard tried to teach him for five years and published a description of his work. Itard felt he had failed but he did manage to develop Victor’s skills. He describes the boy as silent, who sniffed at objects, who attended only to things he wanted and not to people, and had to be taught emotion recognition, but who had a very good memory and was trainable.

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

There is another case who is sometimes said to have autism namely the case of Kasper Hauser, that was made into a film. He walked into Neuremberg in 1828 claiming to be 16, and unable to describe his early life. He died five years later. He was said to have started with limited speech and poor social skills with orderliness, but he had many hallmarks of having been kept isolated in a cellar for most of his life and he quickly gained social skills in his final five years. He appears not to have had Autism, but to have been a child kept in isolation, as were many who were seen as defective.

A paper has reviewed the case notes of 398 children made by Dr Dickinson who served Great Ormond Street Hospital from 1861 to 1874. Of these 400 cases 24 have been retroactively identified with probable symptoms of autism with seven appearing to have primary autism not secondary to physical illness. Two are said to contain enough information to meet modern criteria for autism. So quite possibly there is a lot more of it about that one has to look for it to identify the cases. One of the mysteries is the lack of publications describing descriptions of autism in the case books of the Victorian Idiot asylums. This may reflect the lack of appropriate information in their case notes. It may reflect the nature of the cases that were put forward for training and accepted by the Asylums as suitable cases. But it would be an interesting project to look at the early records. Unfortunately the records of Stoke Park from 1906 to 1930 are not good enough to do a study and have now been destroyed.

The West of England Medical Journal Vol 114 No.1
Bristol Medico-Historical Society Proceedings

FURTHER READING:

- 1) Leo Kanner: Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact. *Nervous Child*. 1943 2: 217-50.
- 2) Uta Frith *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*. Cambridge University Press: 1991 [contains translation of Hans Asperger's paper].
- 3) Harlan Lane: *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*. London: George Allen & Unwin. 1976
- 4) Rab Houston & Uta Frith; *Autism in History: the case of Hugh Blair of Borgue*. Blackwell. 2000
- 5) Waltz M & Shattock P. "Autistic disorder in nineteenth-century London: three case reports". *Autism* 2004;8 (1): 7–20