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Osler on the aetiology of tabes dorsalis (Locomotor Ataxia)

Many neurologists now have little experience of tabes dorsalis but we all assume its syphilitic aetiology. It is of interest to reflect on opinions when the disease was rife.

In his fourth edition, Osler¹ recalls that of a series of 8642 cases in the neurological dispensary of Johns Hopkins, 89 were locomotor ataxia; males outnumbered females 10:1, and it was a rarity in the black population. The role of syphilis was not a constant factor. According to Erb, Fournier and Gowers, from 50-75%, of all cases there is a history of this disease. Erb's recent figures are most striking; of 300 cases of tabes in private practice 89% had had syphilis. Moebius goes so far as to say, "The longer I reflect upon it the more firmly I believe that tabes never originates without syphilis."

Osler mentions "excessive fatigue, overexertion,

injury, exposure to cold and wet, and sexual excesses are all assigned causes . . . alcohol excess does not seem to predispose to this disease . . . there are now a good many cases on record of the existence . . . in both husband and wife."

One fascinating clinical titbit: "when optic atrophy develops early and leads to blindness, ataxia rarely if ever supervenes . . . a sort of antagonism between the ocular symptoms and the progress of the ataxia. Charcot laid considerable stress upon this, and both Dejerine and Spiller have since emphasized the point."

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1 Osler W. *The principles and practice of medicine*, 4th ed. Edinburgh and London: Young J Pentland, 1901:920-8.