Exploding head syndrome, snapping of the brain or episodic cranial sensory shock?

To the Editor,

Recently, while writing our respective reviews on what has been called exploding head syndrome (EHS), it became apparent that citation ordering in the condition may have snapped at an early stage. We write with an illustrative case as a clinical entrée to set the bibliographic record straight. For background, EHS is a paroxysmal sensory parasomnia not associated with significant pain. The typical phenomenology of EHS can be briefly captured in the case of a patient recently seen by the first author.

Case: A 60-year-old man reported of a sudden sensation of an explosion in the head with a bright flash of light just as he fell asleep. He was very clear that the sensation was not painful, but rather troublesome, as it was unexplained and frightening.

As described in the case, such patients have a sudden feeling that their head is exploding or of a sudden noise, sometimes associated with visual flashes. It occurs solely in the transition between wakefulness and sleep, in either direction. It is completely benign with no established treatment.

A recent review tracing the history of EHS noted that it was likely first described by Mitchell who reported a patient with a nocturnal sensation of a ‘pistol shot’. Mitchell later used the term ‘sensory shock’, and recognised it as a sleep disorder. The syndrome was re-discovered as a ‘Snapping of the Brain’ in 1920, and then later christened EHS in the late 1980s. The first substantial series of patients captured a small female preponderance and generally older age of onset, although more recent work has called these initial hypotheses into question.

Unfortunately, Pearce was initially unaware of the previous descriptions when the first EHS paper was written, and did not cite Armstrong-Jones until a second paper. In this second paper Mitchell is cited, however the journal—International Journal of Medical Sciences—is not correct, and should actually be American Journal of Medical Sciences. The author seemed unaware of the 1876 article containing the initial medical description of the syndrome. More unfortunately the headache literature has followed Pearce and continues to cite incorrectly Mitchell’s work, while others offer precedence to Armstrong-Jones. The sleep literature have variously utilised the inaccurate reference, ‘Snapping of the Brain’, or, more recently, the correct citation.

Since the head clearly does not explode and very often there are additional symptoms, such as a bright flashing light, we propose use of the term Episodic Cranial Sensory Shock in order to attribute to Mitchell and also to describe the symptoms more accurately. While EHS is certainly memorable and evocative, it is at best an incomplete description.

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Contributors PJG and BS contributed equally to the writing of the letter.

Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

REFERENCE


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*J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2016 87: 1259-1260 originally published online February 1, 2016
doi: 10.1136/jnnp-2015-312617

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