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Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry 1991;54:387

Neurological stamp

St Vitus (286-302)

According to legend St Vitus was accused of witchcraft and sorcery after miraculously curing the fits that afflicted the son of Emperor Diocletian. Just before being tortured St Vitus prayed that those who commemorated the day of his death should be protected from the dancing mania. St Vitus' dance was probably a form of mass hysteria with the participants dancing wildly until they fell to the ground exhausted. In Italy it was attributed to the bite of the venomous spider, the tarantula, and was thus called tarantism. The tarantella, a rapid whirling Italian dance was once thought to be a cure for tarantism. In Germany it was considered to be the work of the devil, curable only by the church until Paracelsus (1492-1541) attempted to prove that it was really a disease.

The illness, St Vitus' dance or chorea minor, was described by Sydenham in 1686 thus, "Chorea Sancti Viti is a sort of convulsion which chiefly invades boys and girls from 10 years of age to puberty; first, it shows itself by a certain lameness, or rather instability of one of the legs, which the patient drags after him like a fool; afterward it appears in the hand of the same side; which he that is affected by the disease, can by no means keep in the same posture for one moment, if it be brought to the breast, or any other position or place, by a certain convulsion, let the patient do what he can."

There have been a number of stamps honouring St Vitus including one in 1923 where he is shown as the patron saint of Fiume, now Rijeka. He is also the patron saint of dancers. The stamp shown here was issued by Czechoslovakia in 1970 (Stanley Gibbons 1893, Scott 1689).

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