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Nicolaus Petreus Tulpus (1593-1674) on headaches

Nicolaus Pietersz Dirksz, son of Pieter Dirksz, a merchant, was born in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, on 11 October 1593. He studied under Pauw and Bontius at Leiden. He changed his name, adopting the tulips which adorned the façade of his home on Keizersgracht. A fine anatomist, pathologist, and physician, he provided early descriptions of the ileocaecal valve (Tulp's valve), angina interna, kidney stones, a bronchial cast, beriberi indorum, and tapeworms. Tulp is immortalised by his friend Rembrandt in *The anatomy lesson*, to be seen in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, which shows Tulp, in an exquisite lace collar and tassels, dissecting before a group of surgeons.

In his "golden work" (Haller) *Observationes medicae*, published in 1641 (fig), Tulp described a fat man who had suffered from severe headaches for a considerable time.¹ Several treatments had failed. "He asked nature for help, . . . and lost a great amount of fluid from the nose . . . (and) was relieved in a short period of time."

Being a Hippocratic physician, Tulp cited the aphorism (Aph. 10, Book VI): "who has headache, and is very sick, and if matter, water and blood escapes from the nose or ears, will be cured". We are left to wonder whether this was a transient CSF leak from head injury or hydrocephalus.

Tulp also relates the story of "the carpenter's wife who had headaches for many years, accompanied by a warm feeling ascending from the foot to the head and back to the big toe. Tulp ordered cupping by which the volatile spirit could drain from the body; the patient recovered soon."

He distinguishes between cephalia—headache accompanying febrile illnesses, and cephalalgia—recurring endogenous headache.

He tells of an Isaak van Halmaal who:

. . . in the beginning of the summer season, was inflicted with a very severe headache, occurring and disappearing daily on fixed hours, with such intensity, that he often assured me that he could not bear the pain any more or he would succumb shortly. For rarely it lasted longer than two hours. And the rest of the day there was no fever, nor indisposition of the urine, nor any infirmity of the pulse. But this recurring pain lasted until the fourteenth day . . ."²

The usual treatment with cupping or blister-raising plasters applied to the occiput gave no relief. The description suggests cluster headache although unilateral pain, lacrimation, and redness of the eye were not mentioned.

I have mentioned elsewhere the later account of probable cluster headache by Thomas Willis in *De anima brutorum* published in 1672, who described a venerable matron who began to suffer every afternoon at 4 pm from recurring severe headache.³ In 1747

Joannes Christoph Ulricus Oppermann published his little acknowledged *dissertatio medica inauguralis*, entitled *Hemicrania horologica* which may be the first account of the variant, chronic paroxysmal hemicrania. The later depiction of cluster headache awaited the doubtful account of Benjamin Hutchinson and the more convincing description of Romberg in his *A manual of nervous diseases in man*, 1853.

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- 1 Tulp NP. *Observationes medicae*, 5th edn. Book 1, Ch 13, Leiden: Vivie, 1716.
- 2 Koehler PJ. Headache in Tulp's *Observationes medicae* (1641) with description of cluster-headache. Paper read to 3rd meeting Anglo-Dutch Migraine Association, The Hague, The Netherlands, 7 May 1993.
- 3 Pearce JMS. Early descriptions of cluster headache. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1989;52:466.

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Nicholas Tulp (1593-1674). Engraving by L. Visscher (frontispiece to *Observationes medicae*).¹

See also p. 637