A note on Menière’s syndrome

“He that is giddy thinks the world turns round”

Taming of the Shrew, V, ii, 20

Shakespeare and his son-in-law, Dr John Hall, encountered patients with concurrent vertigo and deafness.1 Sir William Gowers reported that: “The association of tinnitus aurium and vertigo was noted by Burns in 1809,”2 long before Menière’s description. Martin Luther suspected Satanic inflections as cause of his disease;3 later opinions were of cerebral applectiform congestions, or of psychosis. Menière’s contribution was the concept indicating that deafness, tinnitus and vertigo were caused by lesions of the inner ear without pathology of the middle ear, acoustic nerve or brain. Prosper Menière (1799–1862) had attended

“A young lady who, having travelled at night on the outside seat of a diligence while menstruating, caught a cold and suffered complete and sudden deafness.” On admission she had “a continual vertigo; the slightest effort of moving produced vomiting”. She died five days later. “The only lesion I found was that the semicircular canals were filled with a plastic (plastique) red matter . . . the material lesion . . . resides in the semicircular canals.”4

He continued his observations between 1834 and 1838, reporting this case in an annotation to his translation of W Kramer’s Textbook of otology in 1848. Not until 1861 at the Académie de Medicin de Paris did he describe the complete syndrome, providing details of this case and the postmortem findings of 25 years earlier. It is now considered that Menière’s case was not idiopathic, but was caused either by leukaemic haemorrhage or acute purulent labyrinthitis. Controversy waged for many decades about whether or not there was an idiopathic Menière’s disease.

Born at Angers on the Loire in 1799, son of a tradesman, Menière graduated in Medicine in Paris in 1826 and was assistant to Baron Dupuytren at the Hôtel Dieu during the civil uprisings of 1830 when 2000 rioters were treated for injuries. While assistant professor, he was asked by the Government to determine if the Duchess of Berry was pregnant. The Duchess was the widow of the murdered Duc de Berry, son of Charles X, and her own son was therefore in line for accession to the throne. Menière decided she was pregnant but support for accession soon disappeared when it was discovered that the son was fathered by an Italian after a clandestine marriage. No longer a threat, the Duchess was released and went with Menière to Naples.

In 1838, a year after failing in his application to become Professor of Medicine and Hygiene, he was appointed Physician to the Institute for Deaf Mutes. In the same year his friend Prosper Becquerel: a relative of Anton Becquerel who discovered radioactivity. Menière’s researches were influenced by the experiments on birds of MJP Flouris in 1820, who had distinguished hearing and balance as functions of the inner ear.

In 1862 he died of pneumonia. An unpublished source that has recently come to light5 is a cache of letters from the pen of Menière. They illustrate his professional work as a physician, his work with deaf-mute patients and their treatment. These writings allow a glimpse into his philosophical mind and into his glamorous social life. Menière was accomplished not only in medicine, but in literary productions and was a prolific writer, personally acquainted with Honoré de Balzac. The letters of Menière show the luminous mind of this man, remembered for one illness, but whose numerous other achievements are often forgotten.

J M S PEARCE
304 Beverley Road, Anlaby, Hull HU10 7BG


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