Kinematic properties of upper limb trajectories in idiopathic torsion dystonia

Thomas Sydenham and Richard Bright on chorea

Thomas Sydenham, known as “The British Hippocrates,” wrote little of neurological diseases, but his description of chorea is a classic.

“...There is a kind of convulsion, which attacks boys and girls from the tenth year to the time of puberty. It first shows itself by limping or unsteadiness in one of the legs, which the patient drags. The hand cannot be steady for a moment. It passes from one position to another by a convulsive movement, however much the patient may strive to the contrary. Before he can raise a cup to his lips, he does make as many gesticulations as a mountebank; since he does not move it in a straight line, but has his hand drawn round in arcs, until by some good fortune he brings it last to his mouth. He then gulps it off at once, so suddenly and so greedily as to look as if he were trying to amuse the lookers-on.”

Chorea (Greek: dance), was used to describe the dancing mania. During an outbreak in 1418 sufferers were regarded as hysterics. They were enjoined to repair to the chapels of St Vitus at Zabern near Strasbourg to plead for the Saint’s intervention. A Sicilian martyr under Dioscletian (AD 303), St Vitus’s remains were moved to France, and, because he was patron of dancers and actors, his altar was used to seek relief from the dancing plague. The dancing mania was a source of great terror: Burton’s Anatomy of melancholy (1621) refers to “Chorus Sancti Viti...they that are taken with it can do nothing but dance till they be dead or cured.”

Sydenham’s account made no mention here, nor in chapter 10 “On Rheumatism” that he recognised the association with rheumatic fever. Indeed this association was forged in 1831 by Richard Bright (1797-1858):

“A general irritation which so strongly marks chorea: The acute form primarily affected children, in which “we have seen that rheumatism is so intimately connected...a peculiar connection.”

The work of Germaine See in 1850 distinguished Sydenham’s chorea from paralysis agitans, though mis-citing Parkinson as “Patterson.”

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