

Information for patients from JNNP

A new take on a famous old case of paralysis

Introduction

Researchers have taken a fresh look at an influential book on the effects of a traumatic injury on the brain, and questioned whether current thinking in modern medicine should change as a result.

What do we know already?

Some years ago, Dr Oliver Sacks, a well-known doctor who specialised in neurology and health problems affecting the brain, had an accident while hiking in a remote part of Norway. Dr Sacks fell while hiking on an isolated mountain and suffered a serious broken leg and other injuries.

In 1984 Dr Sacks wrote a book about his recovery after surgery. He had experienced various health problems while trying to recover and with learning how to walk again. During this time, he wrote that his leg felt disconnected and did not feel as if it was a part of his body. He couldn't feel sensations and during physiotherapy he couldn't control the muscles or the movements of his injured leg. Given his knowledge of how the brain works, he explored in his book the different reasons for his feelings and tried with his doctors to come up with a diagnosis.

Researchers have looked again at the symptoms and feelings Dr Sacks described in his book. They considered if, now that doctors have a better understanding of the ways these types of injuries can affect the brain and how we perceive our bodies, they could find a newer, more accurate diagnosis for Dr Sacks' experiences.

What does the new study say?

Dr Sacks eventually debated whether his symptoms were caused largely by a condition called hysterical paralysis, although he was far from convinced that this completely described his feelings.

But in this new letter, the researchers argue that Dr Sacks' description has more in common with a condition called functional paralysis. This was also known as hysterical paralysis at the time Dr Sacks wrote his book, but modern thinking has refined this idea since then.

Functional paralysis – also known as psychogenic paralysis, conversion disorder, and dissociative motor disorder – is linked with health problems after a traumatic injury such as loss of muscle control, nerve damage, or sensory loss, even after the physical injury has healed or been repaired.


How reliable are the findings?

The new diagnosis of functional paralysis is based on the authors' opinions, and their understanding of Dr Sacks' feelings. We will probably never fully understand exactly what caused and contributed to the health problems Dr Sacks had after his injury.

What does this mean for me?

This is a new analysis of a unique case, which may be enlightening and informative for doctors and interesting for patients.

From: Stone J, Perthen J, Carson AJ. 'A leg to stand on' by Oliver Sacks: a unique autobiographical account of functional analysis. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 2012;**83**:864–7. <http://jnnp.bmj.com/content/83/9/864.full>

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