



Guess the disease!

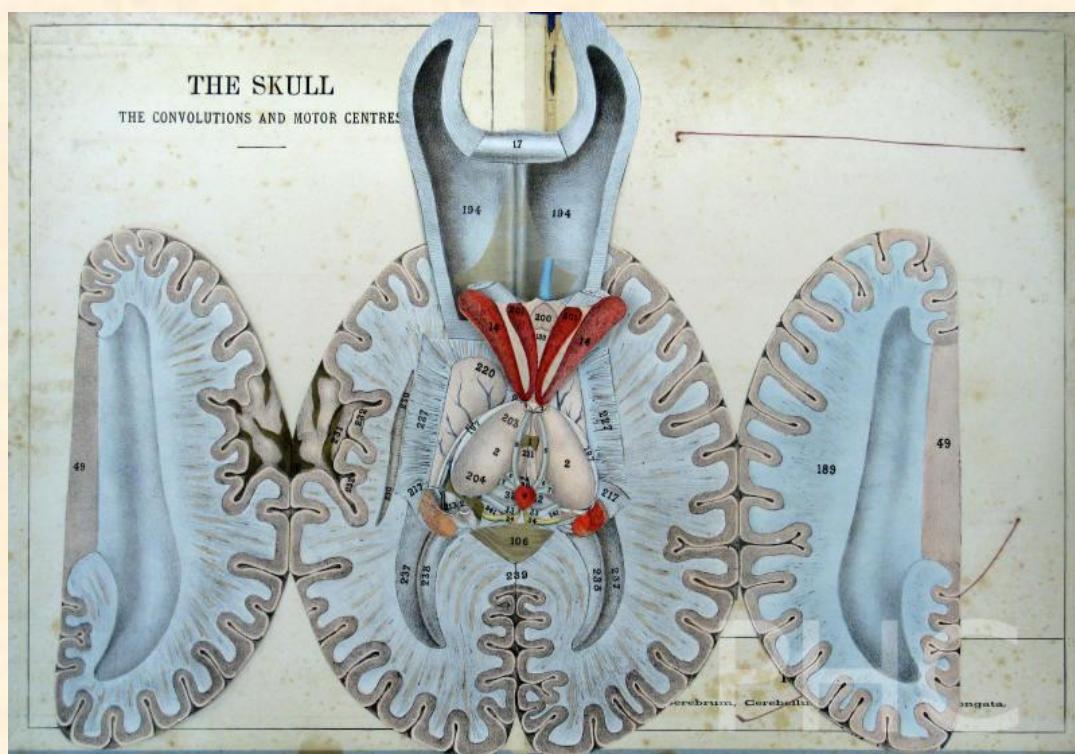
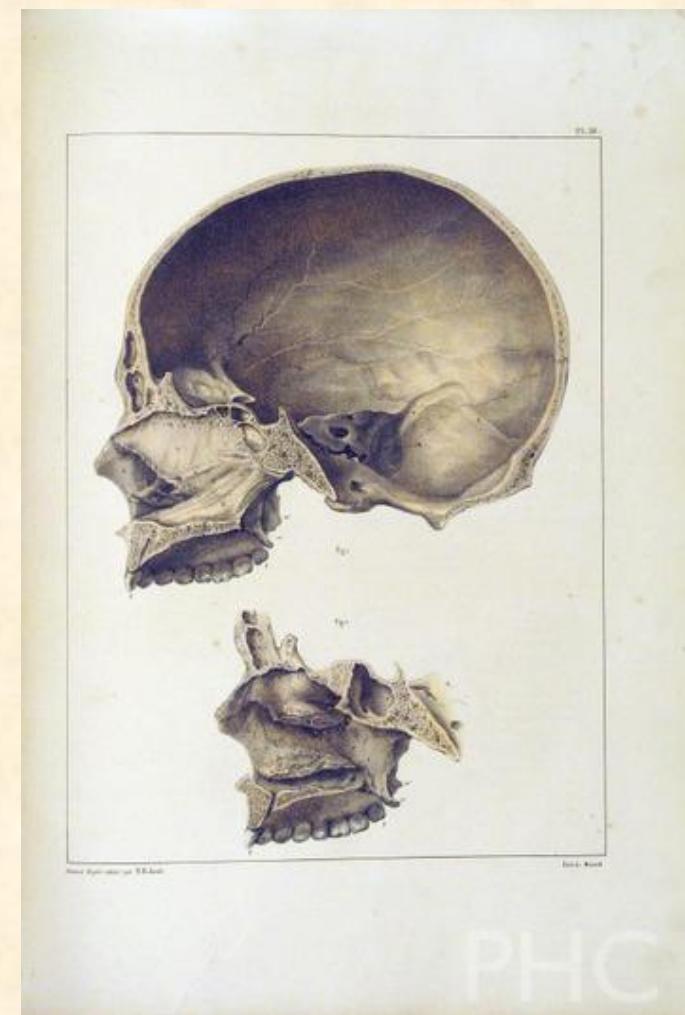
“the beginning of the disease is a sudden attack of violent headache, the patient often starting up and screaming at the violence of it. Sometimes he falls down pale, faint and exhausted...in other cases he...feels a sudden and great uneasiness in the head, generally with paleness, sickness and often vomiting”

- Abercrombie 1828

Abercrombie called this “apoplexy with extravasation”. The modern term for it is subarachnoid haemorrhage. It is when a blood vessel inside the brain bursts. Below is a modern description of it:

“There is a sudden devastating headache...This is usually followed by vomiting and often by coma. The patient remains comatose or drowsy for several hours to several days, or longer”

- Kumar and Clark 2005



“the most striking symptom consists of a tremor...the movements are slow and feeble...this...appears to be due ...to the rigidity which prevails in the muscles”

- Charcot 1877

Charcot called this “paralysis agitans”. Now this is known as Parkinson’s disease. It is when there is not enough of a chemical called dopamine in certain parts of the brain. Here is the modern description:

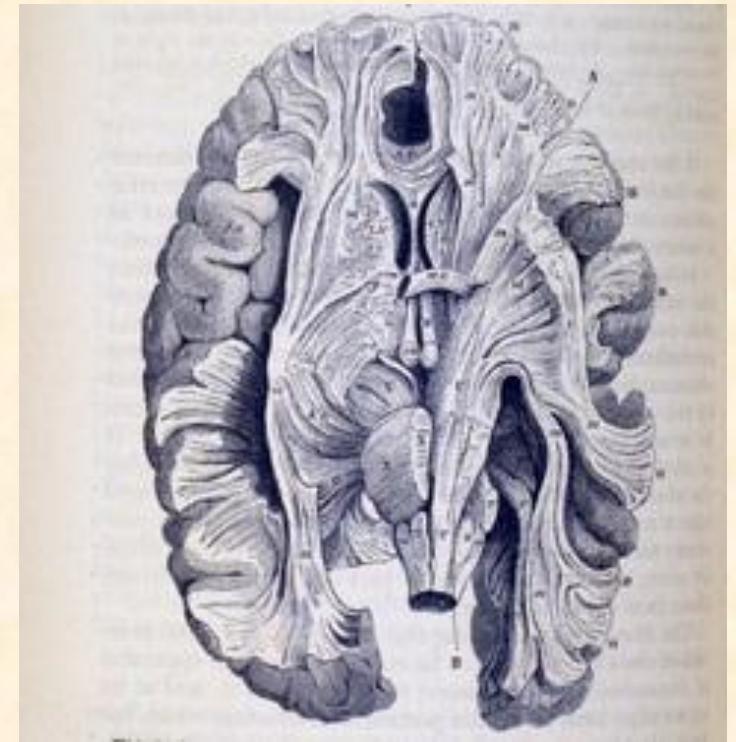
“The most common initial symptoms are tremor and slowness. Patients complain that limbs and joints feel stiff...Fine movements become difficult”

- Kumar and Clark 2005

"the digestive powers, the circulation...are troubled or interrupted: and the external senses, the temper, and moral character...even the faculties of the mind, are subject to be suspended, perverted, and impaired...the sensations especially are preternatural and morbid: and acute pain is referred to parts which may or may not have been the seat of injury"

- Travers 1835

What Travers is describing is "hysteria". This was a trick question as there is no modern equivalent to hysteria! The above description seems to be an amalgamation of many diseases: irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, conversion disorder, and the list could go on. These diseases tend to more often affect women than men. Hysteria was also described as tending to affect women, and only rarely affecting men.



As you can see from the examples above, the historical and the modern descriptions are actually very similar! That is not so surprising considering that they are, after all, describing the same disease!

The trick question about hysteria however, raises an interesting point: **doctors back then viewed their patients differently to doctors today.** They thought all diseases that affected women more than men as being 'hysteria' and due to the general attitude at the time of men towards women (doctors back then were always men), they were very dismissive towards women with 'hysteria'. For example, Travers also wrote that all "malady in the female" was "vague, various, and anomalous beyond the compass of description"!

And it wasn't only women that doctors back then were dismissive of! Abercrombie, describing a man who had had a stroke, said that "his countenance was expressive of great imbecility of mind". Charcot said that in his patients with Parkinson's disease, "the features present a permanent expression...of stolidness or stupidity".

These attitudes seem terrible today, but it was not only doctors who held such attitudes back then. Doctors are members of society just like everybody else and their attitudes were the same as the general attitudes of society at the time. As the attitude of society towards women and the disabled changed, so did the attitude of doctors.