

M. J. Owen Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Wales College of Medicine, Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4XM, UK

K. C. Murphy Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, UK

Earliest evidence of post-traumatic stress?

Written evidence of stress reactions to trauma is relatively new, dating back to the 17th century (Trimble, 1985). I would like to present the oldest post-traumatic reaction in recorded history. This historical evidence is based on a cuneiform tablet describing the death in battle of King Urnamma (2111–2094 BC) and its consequences (Fluckiger-Hawker, 1999). This tablet provides the earliest known description of exposure to a traumatic event leading to a post-traumatic reaction. The

following paragraphs present the destruction bestowed on Sumer and the people's reaction to the event:

"From the [. . . , the . . .] was [. . .] evenly in/on the land.

[The . . .] struck, the palace(s) was collapsed.

[The . . .] spread panic rapidly among its Black-headed who dwelt there.

[The . . .] established its abandoned places in Sumer.

In its vast [. . .] cities are destroyed, the people are seized with panic.

Evil came upon Ur . . .".

(Urnamma A: 1–6. In Fluckiger-Hawker, 1999)

"They weep bitter tears in their broad squares where merriment had reigned.

With their bliss (fullness) having come to an end, the people do not sleep soundly".

(Urnamma A: 19–20. In Fluckiger-Hawker, 1999)

These verses describe exposure to a traumatic event, followed by psychiatric

symptoms. This evidence gives us a glimpse of a traumatic reaction in antiquity and allows us to compare it to modern reactions. Furthermore, it reveals the core features of post-traumatic stress disorder, which are based on exposure to a traumatic event followed by characteristic symptoms such as sleep disturbances (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

American Psychiatric Association (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th edn)* (DSM–IV). Washington, DC: APA.

Fluckiger-Hawker, E. (1999) *Urnamma of Ur in Sumerian Literary Tradition*. Göttingen: University Press Fribourg.

Trimble, M. R. (1985) Post-traumatic stress disorder: history of a concept. In *Trauma and its Wake: The Study and Treatment of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (ed. C. R. Figley), pp. 5–14. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

M. Ben Ezra Department of Psychology, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel

One hundred years ago

Isolating the phthisical insane

THE *Journal of Mental Science* (January, 1900) publishes a paper on the necessity of isolating the phthisical insane read at a recent meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association by Dr. Eric France of Claybury Asylum. The paper shows from the post-mortem records of the London County Asylums at Claybury, Colney Hatch, and Cane Hill that while 67 deaths were certified as due to tubercle, active tubercle was found post mortem in 112 cases, this last figure not including 10 doubtful cases. "It will thus be seen," he says, "that at these three

asylums the number of patients dying with active tubercle, as compared with those certified as dying from this cause, practically stand in the proportion of two to one." A number of valuable tables of mortality follow and the conclusion urged is that cases of phthisis in asylums should be isolated in the early stage of the disease before they begin to disseminate the bacillus to the detriment of others. The tuberculin test is now generally admitted to be the most valuable diagnostic measure for indications of early mischief. Of 55 suspected cases injected with tuberculin 45 reacted and 10 did not react. Of the latter five were alive and

healthy in July, 1899, the other five died and the post-mortem examinations made disclosed no trace of tubercle. In the discussion which followed the paper Sir William Broadbent, Sir James Crichton Browne, and Professor Clifford Allbutt strongly urged the needs of special provision for the isolation and open-air treatment of such cases.

REFERENCE

Lancet, 27 January 1900, 248.

Researched by Henry Rollin, Emeritus Consultant Psychiatrist, Horton Hospital, Epsom, Surrey