

Stunned for a second, my senior colleague said, 'Young lady, I think we'll give you full marks for ingenuity and zero marks for historical accuracy!' I'm not sure that either he or I really knew that Babinski was not to be born for about another fifty years.

She passed of course.

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Babinski or Remak?

Editor—Cutaneous reflexes were described by Gowers [1] in 1888. As Sahadevan observes, (January/February 1996, page 83), physical signs of cortico-spinal tract disease had already been described by Charcot, Erb, Westphal and Rosenblach. But rightful priority for *le signe d'extension des orteils* should go to Remak who described it in 1893 in a case of transverse myelitis at the Berlin Society of Neurology and Psychiatry [2]:

One is able, through stroking of the distal half of the plantar aspect of the metatarsus primus, to evoke a fairly isolated reflex of the extensor hallucis longus.

Babinski earns credit for systematically investigating the phenomenon [3], but the sign must have been observed by others, as was said: *tout le monde voit, peu de personnes savent observer* (everyone sees, but few people know how to observe). His

principal purpose was to find a sign with which to discriminate organic from hysterical paralysis.

In later papers Babinski advised stimuli to the lateral part of the foot and observed the abduction of the other toes (*signe de l'éventail*).

Many tried to jump onto the bandwagon of Babinski's clinical shibboleth: Chaddock, Gordon, Oppenheimer and Yoshimura each tendered their eponymous modifications; but in this context at least, they were 'deuxieme cru' in comparison to Babinski's discovery. It is Remak's account however, that merits priority.

References

- 1 Gowers WR. *A manual of diseases of the nervous system*. Philadelphia: P Blakiston & Co, 1888:1357.
- 2 Remak E. Zur Localisation der spinalen Hautreflexe Unterextremitäten. *Neurol Centralbl* 1893;12:506-12.
- 3 Babinski J. Sur le réflexe cutané plantaire dans certains affections organiques de système nerveux central. *Comptes Rendus de la Société de Biologie* 1896;48:207-8.

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Looking your age

Editor—I note that the Samuel Gee Lecture to be given on the 23 May 1996 by Dr PJ Toghill is entitled *Dr WG Grace—medical truant*.

During the summer of 1994 I visited our youngest daughter, a

patient in Bart's, where I was a medical student during the last war. She was in WG Grace ward and I went to see her before going on to Lord's. On entry a young staff nurse immediately recognised the rather gaudy scarlet and gold tie worn by MCC members on match days, and said, 'Why, you are a member of the MCC—you must have known WG Grace.' At the entrance of the ward was a photograph of the celebrated Dr WG Grace—his tall bearded figure still instantly recognised wherever cricket is played; born 1848, died 1915.

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Honest endeavour

Editor—You write that I have a 'puckish preference for scientists who get it right dishonestly . . . over those who get it wrong by honest endeavour.' (November/December 1995, page 461). Puck was a mischievous spirit. I mean no mischief in remarking that the only point in science is to be right. 'Honest endeavour' may be a handy excuse to give a slow child a prize at school, in science however, the race may not be to the swift, but (as Damon Runyon said) that's where the money is.

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