

Neurological literature: Headache (Part 5)



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Previous articles in this series¹⁻⁴ have focused on literary descriptions of headache. As in clinical practice, it is now finally time for headache description (relatively easy) to give way to headache treatment (very difficult), specifically literary accounts of therapy for headache. The magnitude of the problem before us is perhaps no better illustrated than by the fact that many great and able individuals have suffered from headache without having specific solutions to their problem. Among famous migraineurs one may note characters as diverse as John Hughlings Jackson (the “father of English neurology”)⁵ and, possibly, Harry Potter.⁶

Some possible therapies have been mentioned in previous articles: leeches and dental extractions in Jane Austen's *Sanditon*,¹ eye glasses in LM Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*,¹ a kiss in Robert Herrick's poem *The Head-ake*,² praying to saints or fasting,³ and using a leaf and charm by Socrates in Plato's *Charmides*.⁴ (The use of the guillotine, reported by Dickens as an effective headache cure,³ may be discounted because of the invariably unfavourable adverse effect profile.) A further possible example of charms may be the glass balls sold for headaches by Melquiades and his tribe of gypsies to the villagers of Macondo in *One hundred years of solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Four generations later in the same village, the adolescent Meme drinks cane liquor with her girl friends, then wakes at midnight with “her head splitting with pain and drowning in vomited gall”: migraine? Her mother, Fernanda, gives her a vial of castor oil (a purgative), puts compresses on her stomach and ice cubes on her head.⁷ Progress!

Other plant products have been recorded as therapeutic for headache. The herb skullcap, which was thought to bear an affinity to the shape of a skull, was once used as a cure for headache,⁸ evidently an example of the theory of signatures. Tobacco was apparently a treatment for migraine, amongst other ailments, in Shakespeare's London.⁹ Not all plants however are beneficial: OED lists “head-ache” as a rustic name used in the nineteenth century for the wild poppy *Papaver Rhoeas*, since “any one by smelling it for a very short time may convince himself of the propriety of the name”. In *What Katy Did* (1872), camphor is suggested for Katy's friend Imogen when she has a headache, and likewise for Aunt Izzie, but the latter turns out to have typhoid fever from which she succumbs.

Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947) has been noted to contain accounts of several neurological disorders, including neurosyphilis, meningitis, and stroke, as well as migraine.^{10,11} For the latter, the landlady Frau Schweigstill suggests that the victim, Adrian Leverkühn, take “real strong tea, made real sour with lots of lemon”. (It is not clear whether Mann himself suffered headaches: his autobiographically inspired work Tonio Kroger published in his late twenties [1903] contains no reference.) The efficacy of this (folkloric?) remedy is not recorded, but in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) Fanny Price's headache, one of several instances in which this author mentions headache,¹² improves after drinking tea prepared by her sister Susan, though it may be the “well-timed kindness” rather than caffeine which induces this effect. The efficacy of strong tea in migraine has been emphasized by some authors,¹³ whilst others insist on the withdrawal of all tea, as a source of caffeine, itself an analgesic, particularly in chronic migraine. Might the presence or absence of milk be the cause of such diametrically opposed medical advice? “It is a bad thing to give milk to persons having headache” according to Hippocrates (*Aphorisms*, 64), but equally he advises elsewhere that “abstinence is bad in headache” (*Regimen in acute disease*, 8).

Abstinence from what, we wonder? Could the father of medicine have meant sex, perhaps? No less an authority than John F Kennedy (1917-1963) is said to have stated, in conversation with Harold Macmillan in Bermuda in 1961, that “If I don't have a woman for three days, I get terrible headaches” (http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/John_F_Kennedy, accessed 02/09/08). If this were an efficacious form of prophylaxis, one can imagine that many headache patients might be enthusiastic about giving it a try, although of course headache itself may be a consequence (primary headache associated with sexual activity). What about drugs and alcohol? The nineteenth century clergyman Francis Kilvert who suffered from headache and face ache which may have been cluster headache^{3,14} reported in his diary trying “laudanum and port wine, but nothing did any good”, although on a later occasion he found that “After dinner and four glasses of port I felt better”.

Returning to the theme of headache treatment recommended by doctors, rather than laymen, one might consider the case of Roald Dahl. Recovering in Alexandria after a war-time plane crash (he was at that time a fighter pilot in the

RAF) which caused head injuries, Dahl had "such terrific headaches" that he had to lie flat for seven days in darkness doing nothing, followed by a new treatment regime: "... they are going to give me intravenous [sic] saline and pituitary [sic] injections & make me drink gallons of water – its another stunt to get rid of the headaches." Might he have had low pressure headache? The efficacy of this measure is not recorded, but Dahl did return to active service, only to be invalided out later because of "blinding headaches ... when I was flying ... doing very steep turns and making sudden changes of direction."¹⁵

William Heberden (1710-1801) was one of the most noted physicians of his day, remembered not only for Heberden's nodes but also for one of the first clear descriptions of angina, although he was not aware of its cardiac origin, a discovery ascribed to Edward Jenner. Heberden's approach to headache may be surmised from the correspondence of one of his notable patients, the potter Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795). Between 1788 and 1790 Wedgwood told correspondents of his "nervous or rheumatic headache" which one physician had ascribed to gout. In 1788, Heberden prescribed for him a "blister", which apparently proved partially successful, and advised a holiday.¹⁶

The risks of medication in the genesis of headache are, perhaps unwittingly, alluded to by Anthony Horowitz,¹⁷ who says of an accident-prone character in *The blurred man* that "He bought headache pills that actually gave you a headache ...". The possibility of medication (aspirin) over-use headache in a patient labelled, implausibly to my diagnostic eye, as having "vascular dementia" in Ian McEwan's *Atonement* has been previously noted.² ♦

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