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# Neurological literature: Headache (Part 6)

"...all went to Pitcombe Church this Afternoon. I stayed at home having a little Head-Ache and thinking also that they would be crowded at Church."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the Reverend James Woodforde's diary for 30 July 1786, indicating that the impact of headache on day-to-day occupation is nothing new, although increasingly recognised in recent times.

Further literary historical accounts of the occupational impact of headache may also be given, for example from Dr Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), speaking of a school mistress, Helen Darley, aged "22 or 23 years old" in 1861:

"She was consequently ... overworked, and an overworked woman is always a sad sight ... because she is so much more fertile in capacities of suffering than a man. She has so many varieties of headache, – sometimes as if Jael were driving the nail that killed Sisera into her temples, – sometimes letting her work with half her brain while the other half throbs as if it would go to pieces, – sometimes tightening round the brows as if her cap-band were a ring of iron."<sup>2</sup>

This account is quoted, in part, by two books devoted to the history of anaesthesia<sup>3,4</sup> as illustrations of the 19th century willingness to treat pain by means of anaesthetic agents. In this context, it is of interest that both chloroform and ether were at times used to treat headache.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the story *Sur l'eau* (*Afloat*, 1888) by Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893), the narrator breathes ether to relieve migraine. However, anaesthetic agents had adverse effects as well, and sometimes had fatal consequences, for example the case of Miss Mary Duff "Found dead in a bathhouse":

"The charitable construction put upon the terrible tragedy is that young Titus administered to his sweetheart [Miss Mary Duff] a dose of chloroform to dispel a headache, and that she took an overdose that caused her death. In the despair following her death, it is believed that he killed himself."<sup>6</sup>

Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986), enjoying a brief renaissance with the recent popularity of the film *A Single Man*, diverging though it does from his novella, is perhaps best remembered for *Goodbye to Berlin*, hailed as one of the most popular novels of the 20th century. Besides obliquely chronicling the rise of the Nazis, it also contains some casual examples of headache: Otto Nowak, a working class boy from Berlin, aged 16 or 17, "had a touch of sunstroke, and went to bed early, with a headache" whilst holi-

daying on Reugen Island in summer 1931. Frau Landauer is reported to have "tairrible headaches" by her daughter Natalia, such that she cannot be left, but she never has a headache when the narrator proposes going out with Natalia. Interestingly, when he does take Natalia out, to hear Mozart concertos, he finds that "The audience plainly regarded the concert as a religious ceremony. Their taut, devotional enthusiasm oppressed me like a headache".<sup>7</sup> Isherwood was briefly a medical student, as may perhaps be evidenced by the clinical detail in the final pages of *A Single Man*.

The author JD Salinger (1919-2010) is remembered chiefly for his novel *The catcher in the rye*, a paperback copy of which was held, infamously, by Mark Chapman on the night he shot John Lennon. The novel's anti-hero protagonist, Holden Caulfield, at one stage "had a helluva headache all of a sudden", "felt lousy" and "even had a sort of stomach-ache" which felt a little better after coffee but later felt worse. Prior to this, in his peregrinations about New York, Caulfield had evidently missed sleep and meals, and consumed alcohol. Interestingly Holden's mother also complains of a splitting headache, and is said to get headaches quite frequently. "Take a few aspirins" suggests her 10-year-old daughter Phoebe.<sup>8</sup> Diagnosis: migraine?

Phoebe Caulfield's suggestion of aspirin is perhaps not an unreasonable one, particularly from a 10-year-old, but it is now recognised that this is not so straightforward a therapeutic avenue as was once thought:

"Years ago ... if you had a headache you would have thought aspirin the best you could hope for, wouldn't you? Now, you would be wrong. Endless shelves of medicine are now common, specific medicines for specific headaches. Is it a sinus headache or a migraine headache? Now, it makes a difference."<sup>9</sup>

Will improved recognition, identification and treatment spell the end of headache as a major neurological problem? A tantalising glimpse into the future, specifically the 26th century, as provided by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937) does not seem to augur well:

After what happened yesterday, my head's been in tight bandages. Or rather, no – it isn't a bandage, but more like a hoop, a merciless hoop made of glass steel and riveted to my head.

Compressed inside the tight hoop, my temples were pounding,

My head was on fire and pounding. I sat up the whole night like this and fell asleep only around seven in the morning

... my head killing me.<sup>10</sup> ♦