

## CONGRESSUS

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### The First International Congress for the Histopathology of the Nervous System Rome, 1952

For the first time in the history of Neuropathology, neuropathologists from every country had crossed their national boundaries to meet in the centre of the ancient world—Rome. Apart from neuropathologists in the strictest sense of the word, many eminent neurologists and psychiatrists were also present. Anyone engaged in research on the nervous system is, by the very nature of the subject, confronted with anatomical, physiological, or neurological and psychiatric problems; this wide scope was always recognised and stressed by such distinguished American psychiatrists as the Swiss born ADOLF MEYER, and explains why the Rome Congress attracted representatives of all aspects of neurology.

The subjects for discussion were demyelination diseases, vascular diseases, the pathology of ageing, and schizophrenia. The discussions on schizophrenia were particularly interesting to the present writer. Although chemotherapy has enabled us to control most human diseases, two important exceptions still remain: cancer and the problem of mental diseases. These two types of disease are apparently on the increase, they are a considerable drain on national or private resources (50% of all hospital beds in England are occupied by people suffering from mental illnesses) and still claim their victims in a frightening way. In spite of the fact that shock treatment and leucotomy have brought about some improvement in the therapy of mental diseases, one has to keep in mind that they are at most symptomatic treatments and cannot be considered as cures.

How far has the first International Congress increased our understanding of these diseases and shown new ways for research? The fact that schizophrenia is grouped under the collective term of "mental diseases" shows that it has been separated from the so-called organic diseases. Many psychiatrists and psychologists hold the view that there is no organic basis for schizophrenia. Owing to the nature of the Congress, however, a strong tendency to classify schizophrenia as an organic disease could be noticed. This means that definite and to some extent visible changes in the nerve cells, their processes, or in the surrounding neuroglia can be found in this disease. The chief representatives of a morphological conception of schizophrenia are VOGT and his school. In their lectures, C. and O. VOGT and their collaborators demonstrated that definite morphological changes can be seen in the nerve cells of the thalamus which they think are responsible for the clinical picture of schizophrenia.

Dutch, Italian, and American workers were also of the opinion that certain morphological changes can be regarded as the basis of schizophrenia. On the other hand,

this conception met with some sharp criticism and attention was drawn to the fact that these pathological changes might well be incidental and that the patient might be not only mentally ill but might suffer from a concomitant non-nervous disease which had a secondary effect on the nervous system.

It is also possible that electrical shock treatment and insulin treatment in schizophrenia may cause morphological changes in the brain which may make it difficult to separate these changes from what might perhaps be genuine schizophrenic changes.

Those members of the Congress who were particularly interested in schizophrenia held additional sessions and planned to form a world organisation for the study of schizophrenia. Without doubt the biochemical aspect of this disease will be much more in the foreground in future congresses. It is possible that organic changes in schizophrenia are more easily explained by disturbed cell metabolism. A certain amount of work has been carried out on the biochemical aspect of mental disease and this has been stimulated by the clinical evidence that endocrinological disturbances have a far-reaching influence on normal mental life (M. REISS, Bristol, Mental Hospital). However, research on a large scale in England and America has so far been unable to show how far certain mental diseases can be influenced by treatment with endocrines. Progress in this most difficult field can be achieved only by combining the various aspects of brain research, such as neuropathology, neuroanatomy, physiology and endocrinology, within the framework of a central institute for psychiatry. A start in this direction has been made by the creation of such centres as the Burden Neurological Institute in Bristol, under the direction of GOLLA, GREY-WALTER and others, and in the Maudsley Hospital, London, where an Institute of Psychiatry combines all these subdivisions under the direction of such men as LEWIS and MEYER.

As this Congress was the first of its kind, considerable emphasis was laid on the already well-known pathological changes on which such fundamental work had been done by SPIELMEYER and his school. It was very obvious that the minimum amount of time had been allotted to experimental work and such time as was available, was split up into too many sessions.

While Germany achieved so much in the initial fundamental stages of neuropathology, a definite lack of experimental work was very apparent at the Congress. With the vigorous lead in psychiatry given by certain centres in England and America considerable re-organisation of the work on these problems will have to be done by continental countries if they are to take part in the progress which can be expected in this field.

To have had this Congress in the enlightened and hospitable atmosphere of Rome was a special favour and all those attending it expressed their gratitude for the generosity and friendliness of the Congress Committee.

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